

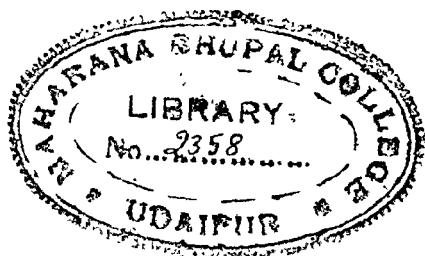
FREE LOVE

ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI

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Translated from the
Russian by
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LONDON
J. M. DENT AND SONS LTD.

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN AT
THE CAMELOT PRESS, SOUTHAMPTON
FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1932

9717

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NOTE

As this work is essentially a product of revolutionary Russia, the translator has tried not only to reproduce the author's style exactly, but also to retain her punctuation, and so forth. The only exception is that he has everywhere substituted the past tense for the historic present in which most of the work is written.

FREE LOVE

Vasilissa was a working-girl, a knitter. And in her twenty-eighth year. Spare, anæmic, pale, a typical "child of the town." Her hair, cropped short after typhus, had become curly: from a distance she looked like a youth, being flat-breasted, with turned-down collar, and shabby leathern belt. Not pretty. Only the eyes good: eyes brown, kindly, observant, thoughtful. One gazed into them, and became warmer of heart. With such eyes one would not pass by another's grief.

A Communist, a "Bolshevitchka." She had become one at the time of the outbreak of the War. She had hated the War from its very first day. In the factory they made collections for the Front, and were ready to work many hours of overtime for a victory by Russia. But Vasilissa disputed, would not agree with anyone. The War was a bloody business. Who had wanted it? To the people, from the War, there accrued only oppression. Also, she was sorry for the soldiers—so young they were . . . It was like driving sheep to the slaughter. Whenever, in a street, she met a detachment which, in military array, was departing to the War, Vasilissa would turn away. To death, yet they were "bawling," singing! . . . Yes, indeed—how bravely they were marching, as to a festival!

Vasilissa was well-educated, for she had received instruction from her father, a compositor. She had read Tolstoy, and loved his books.

Alone against everyone in the factory, she stood "for peace." They would have dismissed her but working-hands were necessary. The foreman scowled, but did not give her discharge. About her, about Vasilissa, there ran through all the ward the report: "She stands against the War." "A Tolstoyan," people said. Women ceased to converse with her, for she would not know her country. She did not respect Russia. A lost soul!

Rumours of her came also to the Regional Secretary, a Bolshevnik. He made Vasilissa's acquaintance. He had understood that "the girl is staunch, knows what she wants, is just the thing for the Party." They attracted her to the Organisation. Vasilissa did not at once become a "Bolshevitchka." She disputed with the Committee's members. She propounded questions. She departed incensed. Later, having changed her mind, she of herself proposed: "Let me work with you." And she became a "Bolshevitchka."

In the Revolution she organised others, attended a Soviet. The Bolsheviks pleased her, and she revered Lenin because he opposed wars out and out.

With the Mensheviks and the S-R.'s she argued cleverly. Ardent was Vasilissa, stubborn—she did not have to dive into her pocket for a word. Other female workers used to find

themselves embarrassed, but Vasilissa could always, when necessary, and without having first to think about it, assume the talking. And always she "spoke practically."

The comrades¹ respected her. In Kerensky's time, at the elections to the town Duma, they proffered her as candidate. The knitters at the factory exulted. Whatsoever Vasilissa said, that now would be law. Vasilissa knew how to get on with "the women." Here with a coaxing, there with a slogan. She knew all their needs; she herself had been in a factory from childhood. And for "the women" she stood up stoutly. Sometimes the comrades tried to abash her with "You should give up your womenfolk. Have you anything to do with them now? Business more important exists."

Vasilissa would fire up, leap upon the comrades, join issue with the Regional Secretary, and hold her own. How were "women's affairs" more trivial than others? People were accustomed always to take that view, and thence there resulted "backsliding of the women."

Warlike was Vasilissa in the year '18! She knew what she wanted. And such she remained. Others, of late years, had fallen off, grown a little weary, taken to sitting in their homes. But Vasilissa was always at work, always "declaiming," always "organising," trying to attain, arguing.

Tireless Vasilissa was. And whence gained she the strength? "Pasty," she had not a drop

¹This means fellow members of the Soviet.

of blood in her face All eyes Kindly, observant,
clever

Who looked into those eyes could not soon
forget them

A letter was handed to Vasilissa—a long-expected, wished for letter From her beloved, her husband comrade For months had they been parted That had been unavoidable Civil war—and now the “Industrial Front” The Party was “mobilising” all its members Revolution is no toy of all it demands their sacrifices

So here was she, Vasilissa, too, proffering her sacrifice to the Revolution—constantly living without her beloved, alone, constantly in separation from him At different ends of Russia were they lodged Her female friends used to say “So much the better, he will love you the longer, and not tire” Possibly they were right Only, it was tedious without him, it used to be so tedious as to defy description True, Vasilissa had little free time task tacked itself on to task from morning until late at night, and there was work of the Party and of the Soviet Important, necessary, interesting Yet as soon as one reached one’s little room again (Vasilissa called it her ‘attic,’ after the country fashion) a longing for her dear one would chill her heart as with a breath of frost . She would sit down to tea,

and give way to thought. And it would almost seem to her as though she was necessary to no one. As though she had not the comrades with whom she had been working all day—she had not the aim for which she was toiling, was dissipating her strength. Was all this necessary? To whom was it necessary? To human beings? Did they value it? Why, they had again spoilt the work—were exchanging abuse, laying complaints against one another . . . Each of them was striving for self. They did not care to understand that their duty was to live for “the Collective.” They were unable so to do.

And they insulted her, were rude, grudged her the ration of a “responsible worker” . . . Then let the ration go altogether; she did not want it! . . . The comrades, that day, had talked until little strength remained to her, and there was a giddiness in her head. Now she sat leaning her elbows upon the table, and drinking tea flavoured with a morsel of sugar, and recalling all the day’s affronts. And it seemed to her that there was nothing bright and good in the Revolution. Only failures, and backbitings, and strife.

Had but her “darling” been there, she could have talked, relieved her soul! . . . And he would have caressed her, petted her!

“Now, what have you been fretting about, Vasia? Such a Fury in public, too! ‘I fear no one,’ says she. With all she joins battle, and to no one will she yield. And now, if you please: there she sits with feathers fluffed, like a sparrow under the eaves! . . .”

And he would have caught her up (he was strong), and fallen to carrying her about the room like a child, and singing a lullaby. Both of them would have laughed! And there would have been a positive ache in her heart for joy. Vasilissa loved her "darling," her husband-comrade. A handsome man, he, and kindly, and one who so loved her! So loved her!

Vasilissa remembered her "darling," and became more than ever depressed. So empty, like this, in the "attic" it was. Lonely. She sighed. She cleared away the tea things, and reproached herself with "What more do you want? That life should furnish you always with delights?" Work after her heart, the respect of the comrades, and her beloved one at her side into the bargain? Would not Vasilissa Dementievna have been too well off?

Such had been Vasilissa's thoughts during the winter. But now spring was come. The sunshine gleamed so cheerfully, and the sparrows under the eaves were chirping. Vasilissa would look at them each morning, and smile. She was remembering how her dear one had called her a "fluffed sparrow." Spring summoned to life. Yet it was becoming harder than ever to work. Anæmia had developed in Vasilissa, her lungs were playing her tricks. Besides, a regular 'Panama'

had happened. Vasilissa had organised a "house-commune." This had been over and above her general Party and Soviet work : the latter was one thing, and the "house-commune" was another, a thing now fallen out of favour. Long ago had there settled in Vasilissa's head the idea of establishing a model dwelling. The spirit in it was to be "Communitistic"; not simply "common life" was to obtain, so that all there should be to themselves, and everything should be separate. Nobody's business was to have to do with anybody else's business . . . Yet there had been differences, quarrels, discontent. Nobody had wanted to work for "the Collective"; everyone had been presenting demands. No, no. Something else than that had Vasilissa contemplated . . . Patiently, by degrees had she arranged the house. What trials she had endured ! Twice she had been deprived of the house. With whom had she not pleaded ! . . . She had held out. She had accommodated. A common kitchen. A washhouse. A crèche. A dining-room—Vasilissa's pride : curtains at the windows, geraniums in pots. A library, or sort of club room. At first everything had been splendid. The women lodgers had, at encounters, beslavered Vasilissa with kisses—"You jewel of ours ! Our champion ! . . . Already you have so lightened our lot that words for it are not to be found !"

But, later, all had gone wrong . . . Disputes had begun over the arrangements. One cannot teach people to be cleanly . . . In the kitchen, disputes because of the cooking utensils. Lodgers

had flooded the washhouse with water, and scarcely done any bailing. No matter what the mishap, the difference, the upset—at once upon Vasilissa the resentment. She, if you please, was the “hostess” there, she, if you please, “didn’t look properly to things.” Recourse to fines had become necessary. The lodgers had then taken umbrage, vented insults. There had been some who had departed.

Later—more of this. Quarrels, jars. Herein, throughout, there had borne their part a couple, oh, such a couple, of married mischief makers, Fedoseievs. Not a thing had been to their liking. They had fussed, fussed, they themselves had not known what they wanted, but always it had been something else. And they had unsettled the rest. You see, they had been the first to enter the house, as also, in a way, “hosts.” But what did they want? No one could make out. Yet they had poisoned life for Vasilissa, through, every day, unpleasantnesses.

Vasilissa had wearied. To tears had she found the affair vex her. She had perceived the enterprise to be entering upon ruin. So, next, a new regulation. Everything for cash down—water, electric light. Pay dues, meet obligations. Vasilissa hither, thither. Nothing had resulted. “A new régime”—yes, but, without money, one cannot get far.

Vasilissa had striven, striven. Oh, suppose the cherished scheme be given up. But not like that was she. What she took in hand she did not relinquish. She had gone to Moscow. Day after day had

she craved admittance to one or another Department, and made her way to "Heads" themselves. She had pleaded for her "house-commune" until on her reports and accounts having been highly approved, she had gained a repairs subsidy. And from that she had been able to advance to a "housekeeping estimate."

She had returned to her lodging beaming. But the Fedoseiev couple, the makers of mischief, had met her with sour mien. They had scowled. They had looked at Vasilissa with resentful eyes, as though she had done them some ill in standing up for the "house-commune."

And they had initiated poison from another quarter. They had started the calumny that Vasilissa kept the house's books "dishonestly." *She* got her bit! —What had she not endured! . . . It hurt her even to recall it.

Thus things had gone badly whilst she had been without her dear one; thus she had, during that time, found an intimate, a comrade, to be very necessary to her.

She had called for him, written to him. He had not been able to return . . . Important business. He had received a new, responsible appointment. To rearrange, restore the trading affairs of the firm in which formerly he had served as a mere "small fry" clerk. The winter through he had toiled, the work being difficult. He had been powerless to tear himself away. He had been held fast upon it.

So Vasilissa had had to bear upon her thin shoulders, alone, all the odium—to drink to the

dregs all the human injustice. And, as the most painful, the most offensive, point, from whom had the injustice come? From her own, from her comrades, from working-folk! . . . As from bourgeois! . . . Thanks to the Committee, she had borne it out. The Committee had supported her. It had not allowed her to bring the case to court, but the members themselves had settled it. Clearly the matter was mere slander. All of it came of malice, and of ignorance.

Then, when the members had been going to evict the Fedoseiev couple, the latter had pleaded guilty, begged Vasilissa's pardon, assured her that always they had "respected" her . . . Yet Vasilissa had not rejoiced over the victory. She had been too worried, too pained, to have energy left for rejoicing. She had fallen out of health. But in time she had betaken herself to work again. Unfortunately, something in her soul seemed to have undergone extinction. And she had cared for her "house-commune" no longer; she had suffered grievously because of it. People had, as it were, "profaned" her favourite offspring . . . As once, during her childhood, it had happened that her younger brother, Kolka, had shown her a piece of sweetmeat, and, when she had reached for it, laughed mischievously, and said: "See me dirty your lollipop," and spat upon it. "There, Vasia. You can eat your lollipop now. Nice it is!" But Vasilissa, weeping with offence, had turned away. "Horrid boy! Wretch! Good-for-nothing! Why have you dirtied my sweetmeat?" The same now with

the "house-commune." Better had she never set eyes upon it. She had still served on the "management," but no longer put into it her soul. Let it fall to pieces! And a coldness towards the lodgers had arisen. Had not they gone against her? With the Fedoseievs. And why? Why? . . .

Towards people in general she had grown colder. Formerly her heart had been warmer. She could have taken everyone to her heart. She had pitied all, cared for all . . . But now her only wish: "Leave me in peace! . . . Do not trouble me! . . . I am tired."

But now spring was peeping through the window of Vasilissa's garret. Under the roof itself. And along with the warm sunshine there was peeping through the window a blue spring sky with curly clouds. White, tender, melting . . . on one side, there was sticking up the roof of an old seignorial mansion where now a "mothers' home" existed: and behind it there was a garden. Buds still were only filling. Spring had come late. But, nevertheless, it *had* come, the beloved one.

And in Vasilissa's heart also there was spring to-day. During the winter that heart had grown chill. Always alone, and alone. Continually cares, contention, unpleasantnesses . . . But,

to-day, a festival ! A letter from her dear one, from the desired one, from Volodia And what a letter ! Not for long since had Vasilissa received such a missive

"Do not agonise me, Vasia, to my endurance an end might come How often you have promised to join me, to visit me ! Yet always you disappoint and grieve me You are my turbulent little Fury ! Have you again been 'scrapping with' everyone ? Well, even here there have been rumours about you, amongst the comrades Have you even, according to what they say, got into the newspapers ? . . . But now, as your affair has ended in victory, come to your loving Volodika, who is waiting, and long has waited, for you You shall see how 'like a barin' we are going henceforth to live ! . I have my own horse here, and a cow, and a motor-car always for duties And I have servants as well, so that there will be no bothers for you in the house, and you can rest Spring, with us here, is in full blow the apple-trees are blossoming. You and I, Vasia, my dear Fury, have not yet lived together in springtime Yet our life ought always to be a springtime. You see, just now you are particularly necessary to me I am having difficulties with the Partkom¹ here They have begun to pick holes in me They have remembered that I used to be an Anarchist . It all began because of Saveliev, as I have written to you already You must smooth things over here, the mischief makers have wearied me ;

¹Bolshevist for Party Committee

there is no existing for them ! . . . Yet for them to fasten a quarrel upon me is difficult. I manage affairs too well. Yet, for all that, you are very necessary to me just now. Warmly I kiss your brown eyes. Always your Volodika."

Vasilissa, as she sat there, looked through the window at the sky, at the white clouds, and pondered. And in her eyes there was a smile. A goodly letter ! Volodia loved her, steadfastly loved her. And he, in return, was how dear to her ! . . . The letter lay on her lap ; she looked at it as though at Volodia's head. As she did so she did not see the blue sky, the roofs, the clouds ; she saw only the handsome Volodia, with his subtly smiling eyes. Vasilissa loved him, so loved him as to ache of heart . . . And how had she got through the whole winter without him ? For seven months had she not seen him ! . . . And yet, actually, she seemed to have thought about, to have missed, him but little. She had had no time to think about him, to miss her husband. For how many cares and vexations had life not brought during the winter ! . . . She had saved her beloved offspring, the "house-commune," with its stupid, non-understanding, ignorant people—she had won the day. But her love for, her missing of, Volodia she had none the less retained in her soul's recesses. Her love for him had remained immutably in her heart. She had thought of him, and felt : "He is here, Volodia, in my heart." And how one can be conscious of a delight from such an impression, and also of what a burden can flow from love ! . . .

Surely this was because ceaselessly she had concern for him. What might not be happening to him? He had no "discipline" in him. The comrades were right. Vasilissa herself knew that they girded at him for 'an Anarchist'. He did not like complying with instructions, always he drove his own line! On the other hand, he knew how to work. The others did not in the same way. He was all there whenever it came to business.

It was for the same reason that they had been living apart, so as not to hinder one another. And she had loved to think "If business there

hindered his work

"Work before all else, and then our love, Vasia—is not that so?" Vladimir had said, and Vasilissa had agreed. She herself had felt thus. It was good that they should be not merely husband and wife, but 'comrades'. And now he was calling her, as a comrade, to his help, to remove difficulties. What were those difficulties? Vasilissa read the letter again. She felt perplexed. If because of Saveliev, that was not well. Dishonourable that Saveliev was, a speculator. Why did Volodia have to do with him? A "Director," as Volodia was now listed, ought to be as a crystal, and to avoid dubious people. Volodia was trustful. He was sorry for Saveliev, and stood up for him. Such men, who plundered for their own gain, ought not to be pitied. Let them bear the penalty for their

deeds. But Volodia had a kind heart . . . And others did not understand that. They accounted his "friendship" otherwise. Volodias did not consort with Savelievs. Volodia had many enemies ; he was headstrong—could put no rein upon his tongue. How if things were to happen as they had happened three years ago ? How if a "case" of some sort were to be got up against Volodia ? . . . Was it difficult to "traduce" a human being ? In everyone it was possible to pick holes. Of her own experience Vasilissa knew that. Had people not been poisoning her the winter through ? Now it was Volodia's turn.

She must go to his help ! . . . She must support him, shame the comrades there. Why think twice about it ? Why wait ? Let her get ready, and take the road.

But the "house-commune" ? . . . Ah ! It was all one ! There was no saving the enterprise now ! Ruin was on the way. As things had turned out, the victory lay not with Vasilissa, but with the Fedoseievs. There was no help for it ! . . .

Vasilissa sighed. She moved nearer to the window. She gazed into the courtyard. She, as it were, took leave of the building. She stood so awhile. Grave. Melancholy.

Then suddenly she bethought herself—"Soon I shall be seeing Volodia !" . . . And her cheeks filled with blood, and actual pain came upon her heart from the happiness. The dear one ! The longed-for one ! "I am going, going to you ! . . . My Volodika ! . . ."

Vasilissa was travelling in a train. The second day of her travelling, but still a whole twenty four hours lay ahead.

She was travelling non accustomedly, with amenities, like a bourgeoisie. Vladimir had sent money for the journey (now everything was for payment), and told her to buy a sleeping-car ticket. In addition, he had sent her a piece of material, for her to make a "costume" for herself. The wife of a "Director" needed to be "well gowned." Vasilissa had smiled when the comrade came from "Vladimir Ivanovitch," from "the Director," had presented himself with the cash and the material. The comrade had unpacked the material. He had enthused over its quality like a stores salesman. Vasilissa had laughed, had mimicked the comrade. And the comrade had seemed to be offended. He had not meant to jest—'The article really is of the finest kind.' So Vasilissa had become hushed. She did not understand the "new comrades," the Industrialists, but to make merry she had ceased.

The comrade had departed. Vasilissa had long continued turning over the material in her hands. She had not been wont to think of fashions. But, now that Volodia wished his wife not to disgrace him—be it so! Procure herself a "costume," fashionable, such as all were wearing, she would.

She had gone to a dressmaker, a sempstress

She had expounded the matter—this, that, and the other. “Grusha, make me something as stylish as possible, such as everybody is wearing.”

Grusha had produced some journals which a comrade had brought her from Moscow the previous autumn. She had made, the winter through, according to them. The result had pleased. People had praised her.

“Very good. Choose for yourself, Grusha. I myself cannot choose. I care only to be tidy, and not ragged. Fashions I do not understand.”

Grusha long had turned over a torn journal and moistened its pages. At last—she had chosen.

“Here, now ! . . This will suit you : you are thin. In your case it will be necessary to make the figure look a little stouter. This is the very thing The hips shall seem broader, and pleats be on the bosom, so that you won’t appear so flat . . . I will make it so as to please your husband.”

“That is excellent.”

They had bargained about the price. They had kissed. Then Vasilissa had departed content. It was good to have dressmakers in the world ; she herself, Vasilissa, could never have contrived for herself a single garment ! Volodika too was such an expert in “women’s gewgaws” ! Of course, for whilst in America, he had held situations in stores of ladies’ fashions. There he had acquired experience. He had become a “specialist” in such work. Nowadays those acquirements were wanted as much as any other.

"Red merchants" were continually requiring to be made good judges of women's frippery : it too was "merchandise" !

Vasilissa sat beside a window of the coupé in the sleeping-car Alone. Her fellow traveller, a "Nepman's lady," noisy, rustling in silk, all scented, all ringed, had gone to see some neighbours. There had been loud laughing there with "cavaliers." But from Vasilissa she had held aloof Squeamishly she had compressed lips into : "Pardon me, good soul, but you are sitting upon my plaid . . . crumpling it all over." And, again : "I wish, my dear, you would withdraw into the corridor whilst I make my toilet." She, the scented "Nepman's lady," might have been mistress outright of the coupé, and admitted Vasilissa thither of grace alone . . . Vasilissa had not liked the "Nepman's lady" calling her "my dear." But also she had not wanted to "get mixed up in" a quarrel Better suit herself to all ! . . .

Evening fell. Over the spring fields there spread greyish-blue shadows. A red ball, the sun, was hanging low over a blue-black strip of distant forest. Cranes were shooting upward, circling. The stretched telegraph wires kept being broken by posts into sections . . .

And with the shades of evening there crept into Vasilissa's heart an unaccountable nervousness, depression. Not sadness, but sheerly depression. What about ? Whence ? Why ?

Even Vasilissa did not know.

During these last few days things had been so

bright at heart within her, so festive. She had got ready for the journey. Hastily she had relinquished affairs. And suddenly everything had made her regret that she was departing. Perhaps she would not return.

Madame Fedoseiev had turned up. She had embraced Vasilissa—yes, and burst into tears. She had begun to apologise. It had been awkward for Vasilissa. In her soul there had been no enmity against Madame ; only, she had felt no respect either for Madame or for those like her . . . Comrades had come to the station to see Vasilissa off ; they had postponed a meeting of the Zhilotdiel¹ (the train had been leaving in the evening). From the Soviet, from the Partkom . . . Vasilissa's "children" from the "house-commune" had brought her flowers ; they themselves had made them of paper . . .

And Vasilissa had realised that not for nothing had she spent her strength, her health. The seed had been sown . . . Something would sprout thence ! . . .

The tears had welled up when the train had moved away. Caps had been waved . . . Everyone there had seemed so kind. It had hurt to part with them . . . Yet the town had scarcely disappeared, and, cheerfully to meet her, as though trying to overtake the train, there had glimpsed young copses and farm settlements, when Vasilissa had forgotten the "house-commune," forgotten the joys and sorrows with which she had lived all the winter, and her thoughts run on ahead,

¹ Housing Department.

outstripping the train To him, to her desired one,
to her dear one, to her husband-comrade
Quicker, train, quicker ! Spare not steam !
Why, you are bearing onward a warm, longing
woman's heart ! You are bearing onward, for
a gift to Vasia's beloved one, brown eyes, Vasia's
steadfastly loving, sensitive soul

For what reason, then, had Vasilissa now
become dejected ? Whence had despondency
settled upon her heart ? The heart was com-
pressed as with cold talons, and in the throat
there were humping themselves unaccountable
tears About what the melancholy ? About
what ?

Perhaps about the fact that a streak of life had
just departed, that, with the 'house-commune,'
that streak had withdrawn into the past, into the
irrecoverable, even as there were withdrawing
those strips of field which were covered with
vernal, tender amber The strips were departing
one after the other, and Vasilissa would never
see them again, never, never

She burst into tears Unobtrusively Quietly
She wiped away the tears—and at once things
became easier It was as though the cold little
clot of melancholy which had come upon her
heart had, with the tears, poured itself out upon
the new skirt of the costume

They lit lamps in the car They curtained the
windows And suddenly all became comfortable,
and not lonely

Clearly did Vasilissa realise, not with the
mund, but with the heart that, two nights more,

and she would see Volodia there. She would see, embrace him . . . His voice revived in her memory. His warm lips, his firm hands.

With a sweet drowsiness languor ran through her body, and now her eyes smiled . . . Had it not been for the "Nepman's lady," who was twisting herself about before a mirror, Vasilissa could have sung for joy. Loudly. Thus do birds sing in spring.

The "Nepman's lady" departed, slammed the door loudly. The stupid woman! . . . Vasilissa closed her eyes, and thought of Volodia, of her dear one.

She thought as though, page by page, all their love was being recalled. For the fifth year they "were in love." Actually! The fifth year! And as though yesterday had they met . . . On the other hand, it seemed: had there ever been a time when Volodia had not been in her heart? Intimate, tender?

She settled herself more comfortably into a corner of the seat. She tucked her feet under her. And she closed her eyes. The car rocked gently. It sang a lullaby. And the thoughts ran on, ran on . . .

She recalled memories. How had it all happened? How had they met for the first time?

At a meeting¹. Not long before the October days. A feverish time had it been! The Bolsheviki—a mere handful. But, on the other hand, how they had worked! . . . The Mensheviki

¹New Russia has borrowed the English word in this connection.

had been reigning, the S.-R.¹ bawlers . . . They had harried, almost beaten, the Bolsheviks, the "German spies," the "sellers of country"; yet daily, larger, larger the group had become. They themselves had not known well what would happen next, but they had understood one thing: that it was necessary to obtain peace, and to expel from the Soviets all "patriot traitors." That had been clear. And they had fought. Stubbornly. Heatedly. With faith. Without concessions. In the eyes of all there had glimpsed the determination, without words - to perish, maybe, but not to give way! . . . Of self no one had thought. Had that been a time, indeed, for "the individual"?

Vasilissa recalled this, and continually saw, not herself, but the group. Of her, in those days, they had written in the papers—S.-R. papers, Menshevik. Invented tales had slandered her, had lied, had hissed. . . Let them "hiss" to their hearts' content! It had been, as it were, a matter of course. And people had not been going to read everything that was written about each of them. They had believed: the right is with the group, with the Bolsheviks.

"You might at least have had consideration for your mother!" . . . "You are disgracing all the family" . . . "So you have bound yourself up with the Bolsheviks?" . . . "You are betraying the country!" the old woman had sobbed. Not to hear these reproaches at home, Vasilissa had removed to a woman friend's. She had felt no regret for her mother's tears. Her kinsfolk

¹ Members of the Social Revolutionary Party.

had become strangers to her. Only one thing had been in her mind : to win a Bolshevik victory. It had been as though some force had pushed her onward. One must not stop ! Though it push one into the abyss, one must, all the same, advance, one must, all the same, dispute, strive to attain, fight . . .

Constantly the skirmishes had waxed hotter. Constantly the air had become more incandescent . . . A tornado was inevitable. From Peter¹ had come items of news—a decision upon conventions, speeches by Trotsky, summonses to a Soviet of Petrograd . . .

It had been then that they had met. The assemblage had been large. A hall packed to the ceiling. People standing on the window-sills, sitting on gangway floors. Difficult to breathe . . . The meeting had been about what ? Vasilissa could not remember . . . But clearly she could see the Præsidium : as President there had, for the first time, been chosen a Bolshevik, and the members too had all been Bolsheviks, left S.-R.'s . . . Amongst them a solitary Anarchist, known in the town under the sobriquet of " the American "—of a Co-operative. Vladimir.

She had seen him then for the first time. But earlier she had heard much about him. Some had rhapsodised about him, and said : " There's a man for you ! *He* can make people listen." Others had decried him : " He's just a braggart." But behind him there had stood the Co-operative Bakers and a group of commercial employees.

¹ Popular abbreviation of St. Petersburg.

These had needed to be reckoned with. The Bolsheviks had been delighted when he had "put it across" the Mensheviks, and abused him when he had opposed formation of groups. What, then, did he want?!

The secretary of the Bolshevik group had disliked him. "A muddled brain—one had best keep as far as possible from such friends." But Stepan Alexeivitch, the most respected of the Bolsheviks of the town, had laughed into his grey beard, and said, smiling: "Wait, do not hurry too much, from him there will yet develop a fine Bolshevik. A fighting fellow! Only, first let his American indiscretion evaporate."

Vasilissa had heard talk of him, but it had gone past her ears. Were there not many people now 'coming into view' of whom no one previously had heard? They were no concern of hers! She had reached the meeting late. Panting. She had just been speaking at the "Bricks Depot." Everywhere there had been meetings, such the time had been. And she had constituted one of the 'orators.' People listened to, liked her. They were pleased that a woman, a working-woman, should speak. And to the point, and without wasting her words. Vasilissa had formed for herself a style—brief, but clear. At once she had received invitations.

She had reached the meeting. Straight to the tribune. Listed beforehand amongst the speakers. Comrade Urochkin (he was dead now—killed at the Front) had plucked her by the sleeve.

"A victory for us—Bolsheviks have got on to the Præsidium . . . Two Left S.-R.'s and 'the American' . . . The latter almost as good as a Bolshevik. Presently he too is to speak."

Vasilissa had glanced at "the American," and, for some reason, been surprised. That, then, was what an Anarchist was like! She would have taken him for a "barin." Starched collar, cravat, hair neatly combed and parted . . . Handsome. Eyelashes like darts . . . Just his turn to speak. He had stood forth. He had cleared his throat, put hand to mouth for the purpose . . . "Like a barin," had determined Vasilissa, and, for some reason, she had smiled.

His voice had been fine, suggestive, and he had spoken long, and much entertained his audience. And Vasilissa had smiled again . . . The dandy Anarchist! Vasilissa had applauded him. And he, whilst returning to the table of the Præsidium, had inadvertently brushed against her. He had turned round, and apologised. And Vasilissa had reddened. And from the fact that she had reddened she had felt more than ever confused, and grown still more red. How vexing! But the "Anarchist" had not noticed the fact. He had resumed his seat at the table, carelessly rested elbows upon the back of a chair, and lit up.

The President had leaned in his direction. He had pointed to his cigarette—as who should say that to smoke there was unbecoming. But Vladimir had shrugged shoulders, and continued to smoke. "I mean to," he had appeared to

reply, "and I will, and your prohibitions are not law to me." He had taken two more whiffs, perceived the President to be engaged with other persons—and thrown his cigarette away.

Vasilissa remembered all this. Then Vladimir had grown interested in the meeting, and still forbore to notice her. He had done so only when her turn too had come, and she had begun her speech.

That night she had spoken well. And though she had stood with her back to him, she had felt that "the American" was looking at her. Purposely she had vaunted the Bolsheviks over the Mensheviks, the S-R's, and the Anarchists, although at that time she had not known clearly what Anarchists were. She had tried to vex "the American". He too much "played the barin". . .

Vasilissa recalled also how, in the middle of her speech, a braid of her hair had slipped on to a shoulder. In those days the braid had been fine, gone quite round her head. She had declaimed, and grown heated, and hairpins had shed themselves . . . She had felt uncomfortable, for the braid had kept getting in her way, and she had kept giving it backward tosses.

She had not then known that with that braid she had "charmed" Vladimir to herself.

"So long as I was listening to your speech I did not see you . . . But when your braid fell upon your shoulder I understood that you were not an orator merely, but a Vasia-Fury . . . And a woman! . . . And so amusing as she

grew distraught, yet still remained brave . . . She waved her hands about, and cursed the Anarchists, whilst that braid untwined itself, and curly little serpents spread themselves over her back. Threads of gold they were like . . . There and then I decided—I would make your acquaintance, Vasiuk . . .”

Vladimir had told her this later, when now they had become lovers. But at the meeting she had not known it. She had ended her speech, and hastened to replait the braid. Urochkin had picked up the hairpins.

“Thank you, comrade.”

It had been awkward thus, with everyone looking on. She had been afraid to glance at “the American” again; he had probably remarked it all, criticised her. She had felt vexed, somehow, and been angry with him. Yet what mattered to her “the American”?

The meeting had come to an end, and the people began to disperse, when “the American” had halted.

“Let me present myself . . .” And he had named himself, and those whose representative he was. He had pressed her hand. And he had praised her speech. And Vasilissa had reddened again. They had conversed, disputed. She on behalf of the Bolsheviks, he on behalf of the Anarchists. With the crowd, they had issued into the street. Rain, wind.

A conveyance from the Co-operative had been waiting there. The Anarchist had offered Vasilissa a lift home. She had accepted. They

had seated themselves. Dark under the lowered hood of the conveyance it had been. They had sat close together; the conveyance had been narrow. As the horse had trotted along it had splashed through puddles with its hooves . . .

And Vasilissa and Vladimir had ceased to dispute. They had hushed. They had fallen quite silent. Both had been grave in soul, and also joyful . . . They had not known that meanwhile love was achieving birth in them.

They had talked, next, of trifles—of the rain, of the fact that to-morrow, again, there would be a meeting—at the “ Soap Depot ” in the daytime, a convention of the Co-operative: and, in soul, things had been so bright, so festive . . .

They had reached Vasilissa's building. They had taken leave of one another. And both had felt sorry that they had arrived so soon. But both had forborne to say this.

“ And have you not wet your feet ? ” Vladimir had asked solicitously.

“ I ? ” Vasilissa had been surprised, and, for some reason, pleased. The first time in her life, this, that anyone had given her such a thought, showed anxiety about her . . . And she had smiled, flashing even, white teeth . . . And Vladimir there and then had wanted to gather her into an embrace, and kiss those white, wet, level teeth . . .

The wicket had rattled; the porter had admitted Vasilissa into the building

“ Until to-morrow, at the Co-operative—do not

forget. The meeting begins at two o'clock precisely. With us—the American way.”

Vladimir had taken off his soft hat, and speeded Vasilissa with a low bow. And she had turned about in the wicket, lingered . . . Almost as though she had been expecting something more.

The wicket had slammed. Vasilissa—alone in the dark little forecourt. And at once her “festival” had ceased . . . Restlessly, longingly her heart had thrilled. With vexation about something . . . With regret for something.

And she had seemed so small, so unwanted by anyone . . .

Now she was sitting in the train. Under her head she had placed a scarf for a pillow. She did not doze off, yet seemed to be seeing visions . . . The past. Her love. As in a cinema : reel after reel, picture after picture. Joy and sorrow, all that had been experienced with Vladimir, with Volodika . . . It was good to remember ! And the old pain in the memory was only pleasant now. *Then* it had been a torment, but now it was, rather, agreeable ! . . . She settled herself more comfortably. The train rocked. It sang a lullaby. Delightful !

Vasilissa beheld the convention of the Co-operative. Bustling, vociferous, restless. The bakers a turbulent, insistent, uncompromising group. Their president, Vladimir. He alone could hold them in check. With difficulty, yet, for all that, with success. On his forehead the veins had swelled with the effort, but he had

insisted upon his way. He had not seen Vasilissa arrive, seat herself unobtrusively against a wall, look about her.

They had passed a resolution of non-confidence in the Temporary Government, and that the Co-operative be made over into the hands of the workers. And they had chosen then and there their management—shareholders, members of the town duma, and bourgeois had been deleted, and those persons' deposits annulled. Thenceforth the Co-operative was not to be a "town" Co-operative, but one of bakers and commercial employees in co-operation.

But the Mensheviks also had not been sleeping. They had sent creatures of theirs to warn him whom it concerned.

The meeting had begun to disperse, and the only thing remaining had been to instal the management. Suddenly, at the doors—"Oh, pray let you enjoy yourselves!" A Commissar—a Menshevik, a chief "authority" in the town, a henchman of Kerensky's. And, behind him, the leaders of the Mensheviks and the S-R's. Vladimir had seen them, and a subtle spark had danced in his eyes.

"Comrades! I declare the meeting closed. It remains only to instal the management of the Co-operative of Revolutionary Bakers. To-morrow a general assembly for consideration of business. But, for the moment—to your homes!"

Vladimir's voice had had in it a calm, assured note. The audience had risen noisily. "Stop! Stop, comrades!" had rung out the

choleric voice of the Commissar. "I beg that you do not dissolve the convention."

"Gospodin Commissar, you have arrived too late. Already the convention stands dissolved. However, if you wish to acquaint yourself with our resolutions—here, if you please, they are. We had arranged to send you a deputation, for negotiations . . . But here you have come in person. That is better still. It was quite time you taught us that it is only the proper revolutionary thing for chinovniks themselves to do the running about with reports, and the making of enquiries into working-class organisations."

Vladimir had stood so wholly unperturbed as he had collected his papers ; but his eyes had, under their dartlike lashes, danced "like the devil," laughed . . .

"Hear, hear ! Hear, hear !" had rolled through the hall. Many had laughed. The Commissar had tried to protest. He had approached close to Vladimir, grown excited, thrown himself about. And Vladimir had held his ground as one so wholly not to be upset ; only his eyes had smiled, and his voice sounded loud and incisive. Through all the hall had his words, his replies to the Commissar, been borne . . . The audience had guffawed. It had applauded Vladimir. It had been very pleased when Vladimir also had invited the Commissar to an evening function, for supervision of passage of the Co-operative from the bourgeois to the bakers.

"A fine fellow, 'the American' ! He doesn't need to search his pocket for a word !"

So the Commissar had failed to score. He had threatened, next, to "use force."

"Try!" had snapped Vladimir, flashing his eyes, and the hall had assented with "Yes, try! Try!" . . .

Things in the hall had become menacing. The Commissar and his fellow Mensheviks had slid out through a side door.

But in the hall the din had persisted. Instalment of the management had been postponed until evening. It had been necessary first to get a snack. Those present had grown faint. They had sat since morning. Vasilissa too had moved away towards the exit with the crowd. But as she had done so she had seen fixed before her eyes only Vladimir. Imperturbable, with a smile in his eyes . . . And so unlike everyone else in his smart blue jacket. But no longer had he seemed to her a "barin." To-day she had felt him to be "one of us." Why not a Bolshevik? And a bold one. Such an one would stick at nothing. If necessary—he would face a bullet; no matter was it that he wore a starched collar . . . And suddenly there had been born in Vasilissa, not the thought, but the wish: trustfully to lay her hand in Vladimir's great hand. Then she would have someone with whom to walk in life. Side by side. Joyfully, confidently . . . Yet what could she mean for such a man as Vladimir? . . . Vasilissa had compared herself with Vladimir, and sighed. Handsome, he had seen much, been in America . . . And she? . . . Plain, an ignoramus, she had seen nothing

outside of her Province . . . As if he was likely to turn his attention to *her* ! . . . See how to-day he had not remarked her . . .

But Vasilissa had scarcely thought this when she had heard Vladimir's voice beside her say :

"My respects, Comrade Vasilissa. So we have quite teased Gospodin Commissar into a sweat ? . . May that become the usual way ! . . . He will come here no more. Be reassured ! And we will send him our resolutions just for his information."

Volodia had been so animated, all glowing with the affair. And he had infected Vasilissa. They had talked. Both had laughed. Pleased. If only some comrades had not dragged Volodia away, they would have stood longer on the threshold, and kept on longer about the Commissar and the resolutions.

"Well, no help for it. I must go . . . I cannot be longer with you, Comrade Vasilissa . . ." And in his voice Vasilissa had heard regret. Joyfully her heart had quivered, and she had raised to him her brown eyes, caressing, attentive . . . In them the soul of Vasilissa had been shining.

Vladimir had looked at them. He had become hushed, as though sinking into them all his self.

"Comrade Vladimir ! What are you thinking of ? Do not delay us ; we have business to the neck."

"I will come."

Hastily he had pressed Vasilissa's hand, and departed.

And Vasilissa had walked onward through the town ; she herself had not known whither . . . She had not seen the streets, she had not seen the people . . . Only Volodia.

Such an one had never before been in Vasilissa's company.

Evening. A winter one. Frosty. Clear. Stars glittering in the sky Many. And snow, clean, white, fresh. It had covered the streets, overlaid roofs and fences, adorned the trees with its downy flakes . . .

Vasilissa and Vladimir had been returning from a session of the Soviet. October—late. Power now in the hands of the Soviet. They had ejected the Mensheviks and the Right S.-R.'s. There had remained only the "Internationalists." The group had guided throughout. The influence of the Bolsheviks had been growing. All the workers had been with the Bolsheviks. And some of the bourgeois against, and some priests and officers The Soviet had been carrying on a struggle with these. Life had not yet become readjusted, the revolutionary waves had not yet subsided. In the town—patrols of Red Guard . . . Shootings had been recurring. But, seemingly, the most difficult stage had been left behind.

Vasilissa and Vladimir had been recalling to

one another the days when "we had seized power." Vladimir's bakers it had been who then had saved the situation. Determined lads! Vladimir had been proud of them. From them had he passed to the Soviet. Vasilissa and Vladimir had been walking side by side; in the street it had been quiet. Only patrols of Red Guard had kept asking for the parole. And on Vladimir, on his sleeve, there had been a red bandage, and, on his head, a fur cap, for he too had been enrolled in the workers' Guard. He had been under fire, too. That sleeve had been shot through, near the shoulder . . . He had shown it to Vasilissa. Although they had seen one another frequently at that period, they had been unable to converse—always there had been insufficient time. But to-day they had issued together, without previous arrangement. And at once, in their souls—a festival. They had wanted to say much, much to one another, as though old friends had met to have a chat about everything . . . Yet suddenly both had become silent. And it had been as though things then had become better still . . . Even more joyful, even more intimate. They had passed Vasilissa's home. They had not remarked it. Already the outskirts of a suburb. Then market gardens had begun . . . To think of where they had landed! They had stopped. They had expressed surprise. They had given way to laughter. They had stood, looked at the sky. Stars had been glowing, ever pouring themselves out. Good! So light of soul! Youth. Vigour.

"In our village there used to be no clock, so we learnt the time from the stars . . . My father, in particular, knew the stars well. He could tell the time exactly."

Vladimir had spoken of his childhood. The family had been numerous, the *ménage* a peasant one, poor. Of everything there had been a lack. Volodia had wished to educate himself. But the school had been a distant one. He had, of himself, made an agreement with the priest's daughter; he had tended their geese, and she had taught him his letters.

Vladimir had recalled the village, his native fields, woods . . . And he had suddenly become all soft and pensive.

"Ah, what a man!" Vasilissa had been surprised. And he had, from that moment, become still dearer.

Vladimir, earlier, had gone out to America. He had told her how he had gone thither as a youth, and resolved to make his own road. For two years he had served on a transport ship. Then he had worked at a port. He had participated in a strike. He had been "given his ticket" in consequence. He had managed to get to another State. He had starved. He had lived upon such labour as had come his way. He had been a packer in a large, smart hotel . . . The wealth that he had seen there! . . . And the women! . . . In tulle, silks, diamonds . . . He had served as commissionaire at a fashionable store. They had paid him well. Uniforms with galloons. They had valued his height and figure.

It had wearied him. Already his heart had been seething with rage against all those rich customers ! . . He had tried chauffeuring. He had travelled about America with an opulent dealer in cotton—driven him in a fine motor-car for hundreds of versts . . . And this too had wearied him. It too had been slavery . . . Through the dealer he had entered the cotton business, become a clerk . . . And he had begun to attend courses on bookkeeping . . . And then—the Revolution ! He had thrown up everything, flown to Russia. Already, whilst in America, he had belonged to an organisation. He had been in prison because of a collision with the police. The cotton trader had stood up for him. He had valued him as a chauffeur. He had known that he was an Anarchist, and respected him. And he had gone surety for him. America had been otherwise than Russia ! . . .

In his own way Vladimir had liked America.

They had walked, walked through the streets. Vasilissa had listened, but Vladimir there had been no stopping ! It had been as though he wished to disclose all his life to Vasilissa at once . . . Again they had reached the wicket where Vasilissa dwelt.

“ But may I not visit you, and drink tea, Comrade Vasilissa ? ” Vladimir had queried.—In his throat all had been dry . . . Nor had he any longer wished for bed.

Vasilissa had taken thought. By now, probably, her woman friend had retired.

“ Never mind ; we will wake her up. We will

take tea, all three of us, and that will be merrier still."

That *would* be so. Why should she not invite "the American" within? She herself did not want to part from him. Such "friends" they had become!

They had entered. They had set out the samovar. Vladimir had assisted.

"Always one should help ladies. In America that was an accepted thing with us."

They had seated themselves to tea. They had jested. They had vexed the woman friend by arousing her from bed, and she had blinked her eyes with drowsiness.

All had been well in Vasilissa's soul. Cheerful.

And Vladimir again had talked of America. Of the women, such beauties, in silken stockings, who had driven up to the smart store in motor-cars, when he, in lace galloons and three-cornered hat with feather, had been standing at the doors as commissionaire. One woman had thrust upon him a note, and named an appointment . . . He had not gone! He had not cared for "women-folk." Such trouble they were! . . . Another woman had given him a rose . . .

Vasilissa had listened to Vladimir's stories of the American beauties in silken stockings: and it had seemed to her as though she herself were becoming ever less and less, and ever plainer . . .

The joy in her heart had dimmed. And Vasilissa had frowned.

"But surely you *were* in love with those beauties?" Vasilissa's voice had been hoarse

as she spoke. Then she had been angry with herself for having made such a slip.

Vladimir had looked at her. Attentively. Caressingly. And he had shaken his head.

"My heart and my love, Vasilissa Dementievna, I have all my life guarded. Only to a pure woman will I give them. Whereas those ladies were what? Wantons. Worse than prostitutes."

And again joy had rolled upon her heart, and become fixed there again without leaking thence.

He had guarded his heart for a pure woman? . . . But surely she, Vasilissa, was no longer "pure"? . . . Passion had entangled her with Petia Razgulov, of the Machinery Depot, until he had gone to the Front . . . Later, too, there had been the Party organiser; she had accounted him her betrothed . . . He too had departed. He had ceased to write. And she had forgotten him.

What was to happen now? . . . "Only a pure woman"! . . .

Vasilissa had looked at Vladimir. She had listened, but not heard. Such the pain at her heart! . . . And Vladimir had decided that he was wearying her with his tales.

He had interrupted himself, risen. He had taken leave so hurriedly. Coldly.

Tears had welled to Vasilissa's throat . . . She could have flung herself upon his neck! . . . But was she necessary to him? He had seen what beauties! . . . And he was guarding his heart for a "pure woman." . . .

Vasilissa had wept the night through. She

had decided to avoid "the American"; that they should not meet. What was she to him?

He was guarding his heart for a "pure woman" . . .

Vasilissa had decided to avoid "the American," but life had decided—to bring them together more closely still.

Recently Vasilissa had gone to attend the Committee, and a dispute had been in progress there: it had been necessary to appoint a new Commandant of the town. Some had proposed Vladimir. Others had refused to hear of it. Especially had the Secretary of the Partkom stood out. Not for anything! Even as it was, the whole town was shouting "the American." He was driving about, like a Governor, in his conveyance from the Co-operative, and wearing his cap awry. He was terrorising the inhabitants! . . . And he recognised no discipline. Again there had been complaints of him: he was not observing decrees in the Co-operative.

Vasilissa had stood up for Vladimir. It had offended her that they should so speak of him, and call him an Anarchist. Such distrustfulness was stupid! He worked better even than the Bolsheviks. Stepan Alexeivitch also had stood up for Vladimir. Then they had voted.

Seven votes against Vladimir; six "for."

Well, no help for it ! In a measure Vladimir himself had been responsible. Terribly he had ridden the high horse.

But Vladimir had, all the same, been vexed. Why did they not trust him ? He was heart and soul for the Revolution. He had learnt of the Committee's decision. He had flown into a rage. He had cursed the Bolsheviks of set purpose.

"The 'Imperialists,' they !" "The 'Centralists' !" "They want to introduce a police régime !"

He had appealed to America, where, in season and out of it, his "News of the World of Workers" stuck out everywhere. The Committee had seethed. It had demanded that Vladimir should "subordinate himself to the Directives" . . .

Daily the feud had intensified. Vasilissa had worried. She had stood up for Vladimir, and disputed to the point of hoarseness.

The matter had, finally, reached the Soviet. Again the Co-operative had not fulfilled a decree.

And Vladimir had hammered out the one thing :

"I do not recognise police measures. Every institution should be its own master. Discipline ? I care not a rap for that 'discipline' of yours . . . It was not for that that we made the Revolution, and shed blood, and drove out the bourgeois—ourselves to fall into a new net. What commanders we have got . . . We can command ourselves . . ."

They had disputed, shouted . . .

"If you do not give way, we will exclude you from the Soviet," had threatened the President.

"Only try!" And Vladimir had flashed his eyes. "In that case I should call out all my young bakers from the Militia! . . . Who then would defend you? You would very quickly fall under the heel of the bourgeois. And your precious Soviet would go the same road. Not a Soviet is it at all, but a police command . . ."

Vasilissa's heart had contracted. Ah! Why had he spoken thus? . . . Now—they would fall upon him. And Vasilissa had not been wrong.

The assembly had boiled up.

What? Insult the Soviet? . . . Vladimir had stood there pale. He had defended himself. And around him they had buzzed, pushed . . .

"Expel him! Arrest him! Throw out the scoundrel! . . ."

Thanks had been due to Stepan Alexeivitch. He had extricated him. He had proposed to Vladimir to withdraw into a neighbouring room, and let the Soviet consider the "incident" in his absence.

Vladimir had departed. And Vasilissa after him. She had been vexed. Why had he so "congealed his folly"? Then she had taken her rage to the Soviet. Could a man be judged merely by his words? Let them judge him by his deeds. Everyone knew how Vladimir stood for soviets: if he had not done so then, in October, the Bolsheviks would not have survived at all . . . It was he who had forced the Mayor to flee the town, and brought out the "recalcitrants" into

the streets : " Now, then ! Rake away the snow ! "

Why, then, exclude him from the Soviet ? For a heated word ?

Vasilissa, agitated, had returned to the room which was situated behind the Præsidium. Vladimir had been sitting at the table, and resting his head upon a hand. Gloomy.

He had raised his long-lashed eyes to her, and in them there had been pain, weariness, and offence. Such, he had seemed to her suddenly young and helpless, like a wronged child.

And Vasilissa's heart had become submerged in tender pity. She would have spared nothing so long as her dear one might not have suffered !

" Have your ' Imperialists ' taken fright ? Vladimir had begun jauntily. " Have they lost courage at my threat ? Well, it has not yet been carried out." And, with that, he had broken off.

Vasilissa had gazed at him so warmly ; in her eyes reproach.

" You are not in the right, Vladimir Ivanovitch . . . You are injuring yourself ! . . . Now, why did you say that ? . . . It has made you seem to be going against the Soviet."

" And go against it I will if the Soviet comes to stand in place of a police body," Vladimir had persisted.

" Why say what you do not think ? " . . —and Vasilissa had moved closer to him. And as a sister had she looked at him—kindly, but gravely.

Vladimir had gazed into her eyes. He had said nothing.

"Do you yourself acknowledge that you lost your temper? . . ."

Vladimir had lowered his head.

"It burst from me . . . They angered me."

And again he had gazed into Vasilissa's eyes, like a boy who confesses to a mother.

"Now one cannot put it straight again . . . Everything is lost! . . ." And he had waved his hand. She had gone right up to him. Her heart had been torn with pain-tenderness. He had now become so akin to her. She had placed a hand upon his head, and stroked it.

"Enough, Vladimir Ivanovitch! . . . Why faint in soul? And an Anarchist at that! . . . This will not do, Vladimir! . . . One must believe in oneself. One must not let oneself be in the wrong before people."

Vasilissa had stood over Vladimir—stroked his head like a little one's, and he had pressed his head . . . of he . . .

to have been entered just like a child! . . .

"I am in distress. Many times has life beaten me. I had thought that the Revolution, the comrades . . . Everything now was to be otherwise."

"And so everything *shall* be! . . . Only, one must act properly, in the comradely way."

"No longer. Things will never again go properly . . . I cannot get on with people."

"You can! I believe in you!" . . .

And Vasilissa had raised Vladimir's head, gazed into his eyes as though infusing all her

faith into her regard . . . But in Vladimir's eyes there had been only trouble and depression . . . Vasilissa had bent down, and tenderly kissed Vladimir's hair.

"We must smooth over this matter . . . You ought to apologise . . . Tell them that you lost your temper . . . They did not understand you . . ."

"Very well," submissively Vladimir had agreed. And suddenly he had gathered all of her into his embrace, pressed her to his heart until he hurt her . . . With warm lips had he caught at those of Vasilissa . . .

Vasilissa had run to the stairway leading to the *Præsidium*. Straight to Stepan Alexeivitch. Thus and thus. It was necessary to extricate Vladimir Ivanovitch.

They had smoothed over the incident.

But the hostility to Vladimir had remained. There had formed themselves in the Soviet two camps. The bright, friendly days were over . . .

Vasilissa had no wish to think further. But her thoughts ran on. There was no stopping them . . .

How had they come together? It had been soon after the "incident" in the Soviet. Vladimir had escorted her home. By now they had always issued together. The one had always

sought the other And whenever they had been left in company they had been at "thou",

Vasilissa's woman friend had proved not to be at home And at once Vladimir had taken Vasilissa into his arms, and started to kiss her . . . Ardently, ardently And now Vasilissa recalled his kisses But she had freed herself from his arms She had withdrawn, and then looked him in the eyes

"Volodia ! Do not kiss me . . . I do not want deception"

He had not understood her, and been surprised

"Deception ? Do you suppose that I wish to deceive you ? Do not you see that I have loved you from the first meeting ? . . ."

"It is not that ! It is not that, Volodia ! . . . I trust you But I Stop ! . . . Do not kiss me ! You mean, do you not, to give your heart only to 'a pure woman' ? . . . I am not 'a pure woman,' Volodia, I have had lovers . . ."

She had spoken, and then shivered . . . See, see how all her happiness was about to be dissipated

"I have nothing to do with your lovers !"
Vladimir had broken in "You are mine ! . . . A purer being than you, Vasia, there is not in the world You are pure in soul"

He had pressed her to his heart so strongly, so hotly

"You love me, then, Vasia ? It is true that you love me ? Well, you are mine ! . . ."

¹That is to say, they had used the familiar second person singular mode of address

Mine ! . . And no one else's any more. And of your lovers, do you hear ? Never again dare to recall them. And do not speak to me of them . . . I do not want to know ! I do not want ! . . You are mine for good now ! . . ”

Thus had their nuptial life begun.

By this time, in the railway coupé, it was dark. The “Nepman's lady” laid herself down, scenting the car with flowery eau-de-Cologne. Unobtrusively Vasilissa stretched herself upon the upper bunk. She would go to sleep . . . No, she did not go to sleep. Ever she kept recalling the past. It was as though adding up a sum. Why that sum ? All her life still lay ahead ! And love was animate still. And happiness was in front . . . But somewhere in a corner of her heart Vasilissa was conscious that the past no longer existed. The happiness of what had taken place then, four years ago, had ceased to be ! . . . And the love was not the same, and Vasilissa herself not the same.

Why was that ? Who was responsible ? . . .

Vasilissa, as she lay, clasped her hands behind her head. She meditated. During all these years she had never had time to meditate. She had lived. She had worked. But now, it seemed, there was something which she had not “thought out,” she had passed over . . . Disagreements in the Party. Mischief-makings in the institutions . . .

At that time, in the beginning, all had been otherwise. And Volodia had been different.

True, there had been no little trouble with him.

Ever . . . had joined issue with "chiefs."
 But . . . in see
 reaso . . .

There had begun a forward movement of the Whites. The town had been threatened. Vladimir had got ready for the Front. Vasilissa had not . . . "First . . . taken a high line . . . He had argued . . . He had enrolled himself.

And he had become a "Bolshevik." He had departed.

They had written little to one another. He had paid flying visits for a day, for two. And again for weeks, whole months, they had been apart. Thus, seemingly, it had had to be. Nor had things been tedious. They had not had time for that. And suddenly Vasilissa had learnt in the Committee : a case was being got up against Vladimir. What did it mean ? He was working in the Supplies Department. He was said to have indulged in dissipation, got affairs into a mess, proved "not clean of hand."

Vasilissa had seethed. "Not true ! I do not believe it !" It was intrigue. Mischief-making. Calumny.

She had rushed to make enquiries. The matter had smelt grave. It was not yet under judgment, but they had suspended him from work. She had besought Stepan Alexeivitch that they should give her a pass to the Front (to convey gifts thither), and within three days had made her preparations.

She had set forth. It had been difficult to get there. Everywhere there had been checks, non-connection of trains. She had been unable to procure documents. The trucks with the gifts had not been shunted . . . She had been driven to distraction. Her soul had fainted with worry. For had the "case" suddenly come up for judgment? Only then had Vasilissa understood how much she loved Vladimir, how dear he was to her . . . And she had believed in him as in a man—believed in him! . . . The more that others had not believed in him (thought him an "Anarchist," and therefore capable of anything base), the more stubbornly had Vasilissa stood up for him. No one knew his soul as she, Vasilissa, did! . . . Volodia had a soul as "tender" as a woman's!—He only seemed to be rude and truculent . . . Vasilissa knew that by kindness and persuasion he could be turned to anything good . . .

But that he was hot-tempered, well, that was true! His life had not been a pleasant one—it had been proletarian.

Vasilissa had reached Staff Headquarters. With difficulty she had learnt where Vladimir was lodging. She had had to thread her way through all the town in pouring rain. Luckily, a comrade had accompanied her.

She had been tired, thoroughly chilled . . . But she had been glad also: she had learnt that examination of the "case" was not ended. Of real evidence there was none. Opinions in the Special Department were divided. Rumours,

denunciations . She had felt troubled only when they had looked at one another with an ugly smile on her calling herself outright a "wife" It had been as though they were hiding something And it had been necessary to learn of everything, to the end So, later, she had gone to Comrade Toporkov himself, who had arrived from the Centre He had known Vladimir in connection with work Let them cease from the "baiting" ! Why were they so harrying him ? For what ? Others had been Mensheviks, S-R's—yet, by heavens, they had not been "baited" How was an Anarchist worse ?

They had reached the little wooden house in which Vladimir was lodging In the windows a light But the door of the porch barred The comrade had knocked, the comrade who had accompanied Vasilissa No one had answered And Vasilissa's feet had been wet to her ankles And all of her had become soaked, frozen Not so much of the joy of meeting had she been thinking as of getting into a warm room, and changing her clothes, stockings Five days in the train, almost without sleep

'Let us tap at a window,' the comrade had decided

They had broken off a bough from a birch-tree, and set themselves to rap at a window pane with the bough

The curtain had been drawn aside, and Vasilissa had seen Volodia's head, and conceived that he was wearing only an undershirt He had peered out into the darkness And behind his

shoulder there had been a woman's head . . . It had glimmered, and hidden itself.

It had seemed to Vasilissa as though something in her heart had dried up . . . Uncomfortably even to nausea.

"Open, now, comrade ! I have brought you your wife."

The curtain had swung back into place, and concealed Vladimir and the woman. Vasilissa and her escort had stepped up on to the verandah. They had waited again. Why so long ? It had seemed to Vasilissa endless.

The door had opened—at last. Vasilissa had found herself in Vladimir's embrace. He had clasped, kissed her . . . His face had been so joyful ! . . . Even tears in his eyes . . .

"You have come ! You have come to me ! My friend ! My comrade, Vasia !"

"At least take your things : what can I do with them ?" sulkily the escorting comrade had reminded her.

"Let all of us come into my place . . . We will have supper. By heavens, you are wet ? Frozen ?"

They had entered Vladimir's lodging. Bright. Neat. Dining-room—bedroom beyond. In the dining-room a "Sister" had been sitting at the table, in a white scarf—a red chevron on her sleeve. Good-looking. And again Vasilissa's heart had suffered a stab. And Vladimir had made them acquainted.

"Let me introduce you, Sister Varvara. This is my wife, Vasilissa Dementievna."

They had given one another hands, and steadfastly regarded one another. They had seemed to be proving something.

"Now, what of you, Vasia? Change your clothes! . . . You are mistress here. Do you see how well I live? Better than in your garret. Give me your cloak . . . How wet it is . . . I must hang it over the stove."

The Sister had remained standing—she had not sat down.

"Now, Vladimir Ivanovitch—let us talk matters again to-morrow. But for the present I would rather not disturb your family happiness."

She had pressed Vasilissa's hand, and Vladimir's, and departed with the comrade who had accompanied Vasilissa thither.

Then Vladimir had caught Vasilissa into his arms, carried her about the room, caressed her, kissed her—been overjoyed.

And Vasilissa too had grown lighter of soul. She had felt ashamed of herself. But amid the kisses she had, all the same, shot out the question:

"Who was that Sister?"

Then she had thrown back her head, the better to see Vladimir's eyes

"That Sister? . . . out of a hospital . . . for hurry . . . ;

though I have been set aside from work, they cannot get on without me. The least thing—and they come to me."

And he had gone on to talk of the "case," of that which was worrying both of them. He had

deposited Vasilissa upon the floor. They had moved towards the bedroom. And again Vasilissa had received a stab—the bed had been made very untidily, as though people had replaced upon it the coverlet in haste. She had glanced at Vladimir. And he had laid a hand behind his back (a habit of his, familiar, and therefore dear), and paced the room. He had talked of his “case”—how it had happened, and from what it had begun. Vasilissa had listened, and felt offended with Vladimir. She had divined : trouble and envy. Pure was her Volodia. She knew that. It could not be otherwise.

She had got out stockings from her valise, but had no shoes to change to. What, then ?

Vladimir had noticed this.

“ Ah, the woman ! Not even an extra pair of shoes has she got ! . . Well, I must provide you with the leather. Our cobbler shall make you some, for your dear little self ! And now, suppose I take off your shoes in person ? The wetness of them ! ”

He had pulled off the shoes, thrown Vasilissa’s wet stockings on to the floor, and taken her cold feet into his warm hands.

“ What feet you have got—the little toys that they are ! Ah, you are my own Vasiuk ! My beloved.” And he had bent down, and kissed both her feet.

“ Come, come, you ! Volodia ! Foolish fellow ! ” But she had smiled. And again lightness in her soul.

She loved him ! She loved him ! She loved him !

They had drunk tea They had talked They had conferred Vladimir had been so confidential—told her all how that he had been insolent at wrong times, fired up, not fulfilled instructions, gone his own way, failed to submit to "decrees"

And he had "made mistakes" in not letting "worthless fellows" take a part in the work But as for "uncleanness of hand"—surely Vasilissa did not suppose, believe, such a thing? Vladimir had stood before her, breathed fast, altogether boiled up

"As if you could think it! You, Vasia? . . ."

"Not that exactly, Volodia, but I have been afraid as to what accountancy you keep? Do they make strict examination now?"

"There is no cause to worry about my accountancy Those who have contrived the 'case' will score a 'miss' My accountancy is like a crystal Not for nothing did I study book-keeping in America"

All the weight had rolled from Vasilissa's heart Now she would need merely to see, to deal with, the comrades, and explain to them the how and what

"My clever little one, to think that you have come!" Vladimir had said "I had not dared expect you I know how busy you have been there No time for husband, I had thought to myself—no time for Volodika!"

"My darling! Do not you know that I

cannot rest when you are at a distance? . . . Always here, in my heart, there is gnawing the thought: 'What is he doing? How is he? May not something have befallen him?' "

"You are as good as my guardian angel, Vasia. I know it." He had spoken so gravely, and then kissed Vasilissa. And his eyes had suddenly become mournful, pensive. "I am not worthy of you, Vasia . . . Only, I love you more than anything in the world! Do not you believe it? I love only you! Only you . . . All else is dross . . ."

Vasilissa had not understood him at the time. She had merely been surprised that for some reason he was now very "heated" and uneasy.

They had gone into the bedroom. It had been time to retire. Vasilissa had begun to straighten the bed, and turned back the coverlet. What could that be? In her temples there had been a rapping . . . Her legs had trembled. A woman's bloodstained bandage . . . On the sheet a stain of blood.

"Volodia! . . . What is this?"

It had burst from her not in a voice, but in a groan.

Vladimir had darted to the bed. With anger he had dashed the bandage upon the floor.

"That wretched caretaker! I presume she has been taking a rest here without my leave . . . She has stained the bed . . ." He had sent the sheet flying to the floor.

"Vladimir! . . ."

Vasilissa had stood with eyes wide-open, and, in them, Vasilissa's soul.

Vladimir had looked at them, and held his tongue.

"Volodia ! . . . Why this ? Why ?"

Vladimir had collapsed against the bed. He had wrung his hands . . .

"All is ruined ! All is ruined ! But I swear to you, Vasia, that I love only you, you alone ! . . ."

"Then why have you done this ? Why did you not spare our love ? . . ."

"Vasia ! . . . I am young . . . For months alone . . . They, the base creatures, beguile me . . . I hate them . . . All, all ! Oh, those womenfolk ! . . . They stick . . ."

He had stretched out his hands to her, and tears had trickled over his cheeks, such large ones, and fallen on to her hands, hot . . .

"Vasia ! Understand me, understand ! Otherwise am I lost ! Have pity . . . Life is difficult ! . . ."

Vasilissa had bent down, and, as then in the Soviet, kissed his head. And again tenderness and compassion for him, so big, yet so, as it were, childishly helpless, had submerged Vasilissa's heart. If she did not take him back, have mercy upon him, who then ? And people would so stand with stones to pelt him . . . Surely she must not, because of her "offendedness," cast him off ? And still she wanted always with her breast to save him from the blows which fate was

* This refers to the tears

* This also refers to the tears

launching . . . Her love would be worth little if it deserted him at the first wrong . . .

Vasilissa had stood over Vladimir. She had stroked his head. She had said nothing. She had been seeking a way out. There had come a knock at the door. From the verandah. The knock had been insistent, authoritative. What could be the matter ?

They had looked at one another. And at once both of them had understood. Hastily they had embraced, kissed closely, closely. They had gone out to the porch. The situation had indeed been so.

The enquiry into the "case" was ended. It had been decreed : to arrest Vladimir. To Vasilissa the floor had seemed to heave like bellows . . .

But Vladimir had been calm. He had collected his things. He had explained everything to Vasilissa—where there were what papers, and whom to cite as witnesses, and from whom to take depositions . . . Then they had led Vladimir away. A few years had passed since then, but that night Vasilissa would never, never forget . . .

It had been terrible for her—nothing had there remained in life ! . . Or would remain.

Two griefs had rent Vasilissa's heart : a womanly grief, agelong, never to be forgotten, and the grief of a friend-comrade for the affront put upon a beloved one, for human spite, for injustice.

She had ranged the bedroom as though half-demented. No rest for her ! . . .

There, there before her, in that same room, on that bed, Vladimir had caressed, kissed, fondled another woman . . . A woman beautiful, with pouting lips, luxurious bosom. Could he love her? Could he, out of pity for her, for Vasilissa, here said what was not the truth? . . .

Vasilissa wanted the truth! Only the truth! . . . Why had they removed, wrested from her, Vladimir that day? Why that day? Had he been there still, she would have learnt the truth, thoroughly questioned him . . . Had he been there still—he could have saved her from her painful thoughts, shown her compassion. . . .

Her woman's heart had felt torn with grief, with shame. And then there had stirred anger against Vladimir. how had he dared to act so? Had he loved her, he would not have taken another. If one does not love—one should say so direct. He should not have hurt her, not have lied. . . .

Vasilissa had flitted from corner to corner; no rest had she found.

Then suddenly a new thought had driven into her heart a needle—what if Vladimir's "case" was "serious"? What if they had not arrested him for nothing? What if worthless fellows had entangled him, and he was *having to answer for them*?

Her feminine grief had been forgotten. The Sister with the full, red lips had been forgotten. There had remained only anxiety for Volodia—an anxiety reaching deadly anguish . . . There had remained only offence on his behalf, burning,

nauseating. They had aspersed him. They had arrested him. They had not spared him. Comrades, too ! . . .

What her offendedness, her "womanly shame," as compared with the affront which they had put upon him, her dear one, her, again, "comrade" ? The grief now was not that he had kissed another woman, but that there was no truth even in the Revolution, or justice. . . .

Her weariness had been forgotten. Vasilissa had seemed no longer to possess a body. A soul alone. Only a heart which painful thoughts seemed to be rending with iron talons . . . She had awaited daybreak. And with daybreak the decision had come to her : to stand up for Vladimir. Not to surrender him to wrong. To tear him from the hands of the backbiter-plotters. To prove to all, to all, to all : that honourable was her friend, her husband-comrade ; that they were calumniating him. For nothing were they traducing, insulting . . .

Early in the morning a Red soldier had brought her a note. One from Vladimir.

"Vasia ! My wife, beloved comrade ! My 'case' now matters to me nothing . . . Let me perish . . . One thought only is choking me, driving me mad—lest I lose you. Without you, Vasia, I will not live. So know that. If you have lost affection for me, do not agitate on my behalf. Let them shoot me ! Your, only your, Volodia."

And sideways, in a corner :

"I love you alone. You may believe me, or

you may not. But I would say this in the face of death . . . ”

In another corner, again, the postscript :

“ Never have I reproached you with your past ;
So try now to understand me, and pardon me.
Yours in heart and body. Volodia ”

Vasilissa had read the note, once, twice. She had grown a little lighter of heart. He was right. Never had he reproached her for the fact of his not having taken a virgin.

Besides, men—well, all of them were as he ! How could he help it if that woman hung about his neck ? Was he to turn monk ?

She had, yet another time, read the note. Then she had kissed it. Folded it carefully. Hidden it in her purse. Next, to business. To “ extricate ” Volodia.

She had agitated. She had run about. She had grown excited. She had tilted against “ the bureaucracy,” against people’s indifference. She had drooped in soul. She had lost hope. And she had rallied her strength anew.

She had encouraged herself, and once more set to work to “ fight ” She was not going to let injustice triumph ! She was not going to let plotters, informers win a victory over Volodia ! . . .

She had gained the chief thing : that Comrade

Toporkov had taken the "case" into his own hands. He had reviewed it. And he had proposed a resolution : that the matter be dropped for want of basis of charges. That Sviridov and Malchenko be arrested. But next morning Vasilissa had not arisen : fever had seized her. Towards evening Vasilissa had known no one. She had not known even Vladimir, now returned.

Vasilissa recalled the illness as a stifling dream. That evening she had opened her eyes. She had looked—there was a room. Unfamiliar. Medicine on a table. Seated near the bed a Sister in a scarf . . . Plain, elderly, with stern face. Vasilissa had looked at her, and found it unpleasant that the Sister should be there, and the white scarf had annoyed her . . . Why, though ? She herself had not known.

"Should you like something to drink ?" The Sister had bent over her, and proffered a beverage.

Vasilissa had drunk, and then relapsed into oblivion. In her comatose state it had seemed to her that Vladimir too was bending over her, and straightening the pillows. Then once more Vasilissa had become unconscious.

Was she dreaming, or could this be real ?—that into the room there had glided two shadows, not shadows, women, not women . . . One white, the other grey. They had whirled, intertwined . . .

Either a dance, or they had been measuring strength. And Vasilissa had bethought her that this was Life and Death come to her. They were fighting . . . Which would win ?

It had been terrible for Vasilissa—so terrible that she had wanted to cry out, but lacked voice . . . And still more terrible had it been because of that . . . Her heart had threshed, knocked . . . Behold, behold, it would burst . . . Bakh, bakh, bakh . . . In the street an exchange of shots.

Vasilissa had opened her eyes. The night light had been burning, faintly smoking. Alone, she. Night time. She had listened. Mice had been scratching. They had seemed to be scurrying under the floor. Continually nearer and nearer. And then it had become painful for Vasilissa in another way, she had fancied the mice would get to her on the bed, and begin running over her . . . And strength to drive them away would be lacking . . .

Vasilissa had burst into tears, and called out in a weak voice : " Volodia, Volodia, Volodia ! "

" Vasia, dear one ! My own little darling ! What, what is the matter with you ? "

Vladimir had leaned anxiously over her, and gazed into her eyes

" Volodia—you ? Alive ? And this is not delusion only ? " Vasilissa's weak hand had tried to reach Vladimir's head

" Alive, alive, dear one, and with you ! . . . Why do you weep ? What has happened to Vasiuk ? Has a dream been interrupted ? Is there fever again ? " He had kissed her hands

tenderly, and stroked her smooth, cropped head . . .

"No, not a dream . . . Mice have been scratching there . . ." She had spoken apologetically, with a weak smile.

"Mice ? !" Valdimir had laughed. "Well, my Vasiuk has become a hero . . . My little mouse has taken fright ! . . . I told the nurse not to leave you unattended. It is well that I have returned home just when I *have* done ! . . ."

Vasia had tried to ask him where he had been . . . But her weakness had been such that she could not. Nevertheless the weakness had been pleasant, soothing. And it had been nice indeed that beside her again she had him, her beloved, her Volodia . . . With weak fingers she had clung to his hand, and not let it go.

"Alive," her lips had whispered, smiling.

"Of course, alive," Vladimir had laughed back. And cautiously he had kissed her head.

Vasilissa had opened her eyes.

"And is my braid on me no longer ? Have they cut it off ?"

"Never mind. Do not worry, even if now you *are* a boy all right. You are Vasiuk still, all the same."

Vasia had smiled again. She had felt happy. So happy as befalls only in childhood.

Vladimir had not departed. Vasilissa had dozed, and he had sat beside her on a chair, and guarded her slumbers.

"Sleep, sleep, Vasia. This is not the time to stare at me. You can stare at me when you are

well again . . . If you do not sleep you will have a relapse, and the doctors will curse me up and down, and tell me that I am a poor nurse . . .”

“ You will not go away ? ”

“ Where should I go to ? I am about to sleep all night on the floor beside you . . . It will be the more restful in that I shall have you in sight . . . And to-morrow I shall be at work again . . .”

“ At work again ? . . In the Supplies Department ? ”

“ Oh, yes . . . Everything has been arranged. They have arrested those rascals . . . But do not you talk, you insufferable Vasiuk ! . . Sleep . . . If not, go away I will . . .”

Her weak fingers had thrust themselves still more tightly into his hand. But Vasia's eyes had closed submissively.

It had been so good, so sweet, to sleep whilst Volodia was near. And he had gazed upon her solicitously, tenderly . . .

“ Dear one ! . . .”

“ Sleep, insufferable, disobedient boy . . .”

“ I will . . . I love none but you . . .”

Vladimir had bent down—carefully, tenderly, for long, kissed her closed eyes . . .

And Vasilissa could have died then ! A better thing than happiness—nothing better in life would ever exist . . .

Vasilissa recalled her thoughts at that time, and became afraid. Would it never again be so? Had her heart presaged truly at the time: that better happiness would never befall? . . .

Yet now? Would not there all the more be the same joy, the same happiness? . . . She was going to him, to her dear one. He was calling her, waiting. He had sent a comrade to hurry her. Money for the journey. A dress. Of course, that being so, he loved her? Why should not the same happiness be again? Vasilissa wished to believe that the happiness would be again, but at the bottom of her heart there was stirring a little worm. She was not sure . . . Why so? What had altered?

And once more Vasilissa reflected, memorised . . .

They had parted then unexpectedly. The Front had undergone a shift. Vladimir had departed whilst Vasilissa had still been weak, still scarcely able to move a foot. They had parted nicely, affectionately. They had not made mention of the Sister. Vasilissa had understood that for Vladimir the woman had in very truth been "but a glassful of vodka—one drinks, and forgets."

Vasilissa had returned to her own place, to her garret, and at once gone to work. Everything, at the time, had seemed to be as before, to be well. Yet, as Vasilissa now recalled, something

had come to be lying upon her heart. Somewhere, in the depths, there had been nipping her either "offendedness" with Volodia over the Sister with the pouting lips or distrust . . . Yet, all the same, Vasilissa had still loved Volodia steadfastly. Common anxiety and illness had soldered them still more strongly together. Previously they had been "in love," but they had not yet been "akin." Now that jointly they had lived through sorrow, they had become nearer of heart than ever . . . Nevertheless love no longer gave Vasilissa joy as bright as a spring morning. That love had become obscured, overcast, as it were, with clouds. Vice versa, it was now grown deeper and firmer.

However, had that been a time for love, for joy, at all?

Fronts, separation . . . Plots . . . Mobilisations of Communists. Menaces from all quarters. To each one tasks neck-high . . . Vasilissa had had to deal with the refugees . . . She had been appointed to the Zhilotdiel of the Soviet. And then there had been born to her the idea of founding a "house-commune." According solely to her own "conception," but with the help of Stepan Alexeivitch . . . He had supported her. With advice. With finances. And Vasilissa had plunged headlong into the work.

She had lived so. For months. Often she had remembered Volodia, borne him always in her heart, but had no time to miss him. He too would be at work, and probably everything was

going smoothly with him. "He will not be blustering now." He would be living in peace with "chiefs" and officials.

And suddenly Vladimir had turned up in Vasilissa's garret. Unexpectedly, unguessably. During a retreat he had come under an exchange of shots. They had wounded him. Not dangerously. But rest had been necessary. They had granted him leave. So he had come to "wife for board."

Vasilissa had been glad. Yet also there had stirred in her the thought: "Why has it so happened that he has come here just now? What has not living cost me during the past two months, and will do during the next?" Just then, too, Vasilissa had had engagements, affairs—one couldn't turn round for them! . . . A Convention, reorganisation of the Zhilotdiel, the feud over the "house-commune" . . . Simply, one could see no end to all these matters! . . . And one could not be everywhere at once. Yet here was Volodia again. And wounded, at that. Nursing would be needed . . . What was to be done?

Anxiety had clouded Vasilissa's joy.

But Vladimir had been as lighthearted as a child.

He had brought her some shoes, even as he had promised on the day of her arrival at his place . . .

"Come! Try them on, Vasia. Let us see what your toys of feet will look like in them."

Vasilissa had had little time to spare. There

had been a session of the Zhihotdiel due Yet she must not vex Volodia

She had tried them on It had been like seeing one's feet for the first time

Then she had looked at Vladimir with eyes of happiness, and known not how to thank him . . .

"I would have taken you into my arms, Vasiutka, but my arm will not let me . . . I love your little feet . . . And your brown eyes !"

Vladimir had been pleased with himself, animated Joyous He had talked, jested

But it had long been time for Vasilissa to go to the session ! She had listened to her husband with one ear only She had glanced at the alarm clock which stood on a chest of drawers beside a little mirror The minutes had run away . . . They had departed . . . And she would be being awaited at the session They would be growing angry why did she keep people waiting ? It was not seemly for the President to be late !

Only towards evening had Vasilissa returned home Tired Unpleasantnesses had occurred With worry in her soul

She had climbed the staircase to her garret, and meanwhile reflected "It is nice that Volodia has come I can share my trouble with him, and take his advice . . ."

She had entered But no Volodia Whither had he gone ? His hat was in place, and his cloak hanging up

Probably he had gone out for a moment only

She had tidied the room. She had placed tea upon the stove. Still no Volodia.

Whither had he disappeared? She had gone into the corridor. He had been nowhere to be seen. She had sat down again, waited. And she had grown uneasy. What could have happened to him?

She had just gone out into the corridor once more when Volodia had issued from the Fedoseievs' flat. They had been laughing, taking leave of one another as ever such friends . . . Why had Volodia gone to them? Surely he knew that they were mischief-makers?

"So you have returned at last, Vasia? And I there, in your cage, had found things so tedious that I could almost have hanged myself . . . All day had I been alone. Then, luckily, I met Gospodin Fedoseiev in the corridor, and he haled me off to his place . . ."

"Do not associate with them, Volodia. You yourself know that they are mischief-makers! . . ."

"Then would you bid me die of boredom, solitary, in your garret? Do not run away from me for a whole day, and I will not go to the Fedoseievs' . . ."

"But, you see, I have my business . . . I should have been glad to have come home sooner, but I could not . . . There was no getting away! . . ."

"Business! But did not I, when you were ill with typhus, sit up all night beside you? Yes, and, in the daytime as well, look after you? . . . Here, Vasia, have I come to you wounded . . . Even yet the fever is not past . . ."

Vasilissa had heard reproach in his voice. Volodia was "offended" that she had gone out for the whole day. But how could it have been helped? Why, there was reorganisation in the Department, a Convention pending . . .

"It is as though you were not glad to see me, Vasia," Vladimir had said. "I had not expected to find you thus . . ."

"Oh, what a thing for you to say! I not glad? . . . But I . . . Dearest one of mine, my darling! . . . You are my cherished husband!" . . .

And she had thrown herself about his neck. She had nearly upset the stove.

"There, there! . . . Yet, all the same, I had thought: 'Does she love me no longer? Has she not set up another one? So cold, so indifferent, she is . . . And her eyes are distant. Not caressing.'"

"I am tired, Volodia . . . I have not the strength to deal with everything."

"O my indefatigable little Fury!" And Volodia had pressed Vasilissa to himself, and kissed her . . .

They had lived thus together in the "garret-den."

At first nothing had happened. Although it had been difficult for Vasilissa to divide herself

between work and husband, she had done so always with gladness.

For now she had had someone with whom to confer, to hold consultation, to share mishaps, to devise fresh plans.

Only the "housekeeping" had bothered her. At the Front Vladimir had become accustomed to "feed in style." But, at Vasilissa's, what, if you please, was the "housekeeping"? A Soviet meal, and tea with a tiny lump of sugar for flavouring. For the first few days there had sufficed some provisions which Vladimir had brought with him.

"I have got hold of a modicum of stuff—flour, sugar, sausage. Oh, I know that it is nothing to you, that you live like a sparrow under an eave, and have saved not a single grain."

But when Vladimir's supplies had come to an end the two had had to pass to a Soviet meal . . . Vladimir had not been pleased, had frowned.

"Why always feed me with millet, millet, millet? As though I were a fowl!"

"There is nothing else to be got. I am living on a ration . . ."

"'There is nothing else to be got,' indeed! The Fedoseievs receive a ration no larger than yours, yet yesterday they treated me to a whole dinner. And a good one. Baked potato. Herring and onion . . ."

"But the Fedoseievs have *time* to do house-keeping . . . I, on the contrary, am, as you see, exhausted—I can barely get through my business."

"You take too much upon yourself, and this is the result. Why bother at all with the 'house-commune'? The Fedoseievs say——"

"Oh, I know for myself what the Fedoseievs say." And Vasilissa had fired up, so much had it affronted her that Volodia associated with them, with her "enemies." "Look here. The fact that you listen to them, and even talk with them against my work, is not comradely on your part."

They had disputed on that occasion. Both had grown heated. Then both had felt sorry. They had become reconciled. But it had, all the same, caused Vasilissa more and more to worry about not looking after her husband. He had come to her wounded, and she was feeding him with a Soviet dinner! He had had more consideration for *her*, he had brought her a pair of shoes.

Vasilissa had fretted, next, that Volodia did not even eat. He had taken two spoonfuls, and pushed his plate away.

"I would rather sit hungry," he had said, 'than put your Soviet *burda*¹ down my throat.

Please make some tea, and get someone to give us a little bread. I will send for flour from the Front. You can repay it later."

It had been impossible to go on like that. Something would have to be devised.

Vasilissa had hurried off to a session. And in her head the session's resolution had mingled with buckwheat gruel. What could she get instead of it, to give Volodia for dinner?

¹ Very poor, coarse soup

Given time, though, she would solve the difficulty, take thought, arrange.

To meet her, a cousin. She had been overjoyed. She needed the cousin. The latter had a daughter. A lively, boisterous girl. She had just finished school. Was living, at present, with her parents, without work, and helping her mother with the housekeeping. Her name was Stesha.

Vasilissa and the cousin had come to an agreement: let Stesha come to Vasilissa's each day, and she would do for a housekeeper; Vasilissa, in return for this, would share her ration with the cousin. And they had decided thus. And Vasilissa had hastened to the session with lightened soul. To-morrow they would feed Volodia as was proper.

Stesha had shown herself to be wide-awake. She had hit it off with Vladimir. Together had they done the "housekeeping." Here they had swopped an item of the ration; there Vladimir had obtained something or another from the Co-operative, on the strength of old acquaintance. Vasilissa had been content. Volodia had complained no more of the food. But he had remained "affronted" with Vasilissa: "For everyone else you have a care, but I, it seems, might not even be existing."

This had hurt Vasilissa. And she had been so

torn between work and Volodia. It was so hard that he should have arrived just at that fevered time ! . . .

This she had explained to Volodia. He had frowned. He had seemed not to understand.

"You have grown cold, Vasia, and unlearnt how to kiss . . ."

"I am dreadfully tired, Volodia . . . I lack strength," she had said with contrition.

And Volodia had frowned again.

Really and truly had Vasilissa conceived (and found the conception unpleasant) that, though it was ages since he had been able to come and visit her, she was, to excess, disappearing, from morning onwards, to business, and returning at night—well, "as though one could not feel legs to be beneath one." Only might she reach her pillow ! The idea of kisses at that time !

Once there happened a particularly unpleasant incident. Volodia had started to caress her, and she, as she lay in bed, had fallen asleep . . .

In the morning Volodia had raged : what was the good of caressing a dead body ? He had jested, but evidently he had been offended. And it had been so awkward for Vasilissa ; she had been as though guilty towards him . . . He must in very truth be thinking that she had little love for him ! . . Yet where was she to get the strength for it all ? . . .

On another occasion Vasilissa had returned home earlier than usual. Vladimir himself had been preparing dinner.

“What is this? Where is Stesha?”

“That Stesha of yours has turned out to be a hussy. I have sent her about her business. If she dares show herself here again, I’ll throw her from the fourth story.”

“Then what has happened? What has she done?”

“Merely take my word for it that the girl is a hussy . . . I should not have sent her off for nothing. To tell you all would only upset you. The wicked, villainous creature! May I never again so much as smell her!”

Vasilissa had perceived that Stesha had much angered Volodia. She had decided, for the moment, to ask no more questions. She had reflected: “Probably the girl had stolen something. Nowadays that often happens. And Volodia values his effects. He has in him that ‘instinct of the proprietor,’ although also he is kind, and invariably shares with a comrade. Merely let anyone take anything off him, and—no, no, O God of mine! He never forgives that!”

“What are we to do now about the house-keeping?”

“A fig for the housekeeping! I will go out to dining-rooms. Also, comrades can be looked up. I shall not perish.”

Stesha had come to Vasilissa at the Zhilotdiel
To ask for her ration

"What has been the matter between you and
Vladimir Ivanovitch, Stesha? What did you
do there?"

"I did nothing," Stesha had answered with
flashing eyes as she straightened the comb in her
hair "Merely that Vladimir of yours came after
me, so I gave him a good one over the jaw! For
a long time afterwards he was spitting blood I
hope it will prevent him getting into the habit!"

"You are talking foolishness, Stesha Vladimir
Ivanovitch was simply joking with you" Vasilissa
had striven to speak calmly, but there had been a
darkening in her eyes

"Fine jokings! He had thrown me right on
to the bed! Luckily I am strong. . . You won't
get *me* against my will!"

Vasilissa had tried to disabuse Stesha, to show
her that all this had been a jest, a game, and that
Vladimir Ivanovitch was much offended with her
now But Stesha had only set her lips obstinately
The ideal! Well, it was no concern of hers!
Merely, she was not going to have anything more
to do with him! A fig for the ration!

Things had become dark in Vasilissa's heart
Vasilissa

she loved him no longer? Only one thing looked
ugly—the question of why he had molested the
girl? Stesha still was almost a child! It was a

mercy that also she was sharp, and knew life. Otherwise, what might have happened? And, as before, the worm had gnawed and gnawed at Vasilissa's heart. She had not known whether to tell Volodia that she knew all, or whether—the better course—to remain silent . . . The blame lay upon her. As it was, she had had no chance to speak to him on the subject.

A new streak had ensued. Vladimir had looked up old friends, fellow trading employees and members of the Co-operative. He had now taken to disappearing for days at a time. The persons in question had not been on visiting terms with Vasilissa. Every morning Vasilissa had gone out to the Zhilotdiel, or to the Committee, whilst Volodia still had been fast asleep. During the day-time she had run home—no Volodia. In the evening she had returned—her “garret” had been empty.

She had felt vexed. She had not known whether to go to bed, or whether to await him with tea. She had warmed up some supper on the stove, and arranged her papers against the morrow. She had listened for footsteps in the corridor . . .

No Volodia.

She had extinguished the stove (it was necessary to economise), and again betaken herself to her

papers. She had looked through reports, sorted petitions . . .

Someone had hurried up the staircase . . . He ? No, not Volodia.

She had gone to bed alone. From weariness she had soon been asleep. But even in her sleep she had continued to listen for her dear one's coming . . . It had been dull without him, cold.

Sometimes he had returned pleased, cheerful. He had awakened Vasilissa, caressed her. Full of anecdotes, news . . . Plans of every kind . . .

Things had become agreeable in Vasilissa's soul—lighter thus. Joyous. Sorrow was going to depart.

But sometimes, also, the case had been that Volodia had returned not sober : heavy, morose, with drunken eyes . . . He had upbraided himself, and thrown reproaches at Vasilissa : what sort of a life was that ? . . . In a tiny cage under a roof ! . . . No gaiety for one, or comfort . . . And a wife who was not a wife ! . . . And no child to them . . .

This last had hurt Vasilissa especially. She had never thought of a child for her own sake ; but she *had* wanted to afford *him* that joy . . . And yet it never so befell ! She did not become pregnant ! . . . Others wept, and did not know how to preserve themselves from children, but for her, Vasilissa, motherhood evidently had not been ordained . . .

"Anæmia," the doctor said.

Vladimir had decided to cheer up Vasilissa, to take her to a theatre. He had procured tickets.

Vasilissa had come home at the appointed hour. Vladimir had been dandifying himself before a mirror. Such a beau he had made of himself ; again had he become like a " barin " . . . Vasilissa had laughed, teased him, admired the husband-beauty ! . . .

" And what are you yourself going to wear ? " He had scanned her anxiously. " Surely you are not without a gala dress ? "

Vasilissa had smiled. What, anyway, were gala dresses ? Let those people over there, in America, array themselves in them, and invent clothes for different days ! . . . She would put on just a clean blouse, and the new shoes which Volodia had bought her ; that would be all her get-up.

Vladimir had frowned. And he had looked at Vasilissa with such angry eyes that Vasilissa had even been frightened.

" Do you suppose that in the theatre everyone will look only at your feet ? . . . That which is above them—oh, cover it just with a bit of sacking ? "

" I don't understand, Volodia, why you are so angry ? "

" One has reason to get angry with you, with the State workers . . . You have arranged for life to be like a monastery or a prison . . . There are to be no comforts for one, no nice dress, no real home . . . Live in a cage, drink water, eat skilly, flaunt about in rags . . . Why, in America I lived better when out of work . . . "

" Well, everything cannot be done at once ! . . . You yourself know that—there is an upset . . . "

"Away, you, with your 'upset' ! . . . Fine organisers we have got ! . . You and the rest have made the upset, and as soon as one begins to mend it people shout—'Are you minded to make of yourself a bourgeois ? Put that back again !' . . . You do not know how to live ! Hence the mess goes on . . . It is not for this that I made the Revolution, to establish a life of *this* sort ! "

"Then did we make the Revolution for ourselves ? "

"Well, for whom else ? "

"For all "

"And for the bourgeois ? "

"What silliness you utter ! Of course not for the bourgeois ! For the workers, for the proletarians . . . "

"And we, in your opinion, are who ? Not workers ? Not proletarians ? . . . "

They had disputed, disputed, almost been late for the theatre

As they had traversed the street, kneading its spring mire, Vladimir had walked in front with long strides, but said nothing, Vasilissa had scarcely been able to keep up with him

"Do not stride along so, Volodia ! . . I am quite out of breath "

He had halted angrily. He had waited for Vasilissa. More quietly he had gone on again, but still said nothing

At the theatre Vladimir had encountered acquaintances, and spent every entr'acte with them Vasilissa had sat alone.

There had been no pleasure for her in the theatre. Why had she wasted the evening? To-morrow double work . . .

Not long before Vladimir's departure the Convention had been opened. Although Vladimir was not a Delegate, he had been present at the Convention. Quarrels had proceeded, "grouplets" had been formed. Vladimir had gone with Vasilissa, and enthusiastically joined her "grouplet." He had thrown over his friends. Now Vladimir and Vasilissa had been inseparable. Together to the Convention, and together from the Convention. At home had they thought out the defection from the rest. Resolutions had been registered. A typewriter had been brought out. Vladimir had acted as "typist." Briskly they had worked thus! Friendlily. All united. They had fussed, they had argued . . . And then they had laughed. In youthful fashion, without cause. The contest itself had pleased, attracted them.

And Stepan Alexeivitch had been with them. He had sat and smoothed his grey, merchantish beard, and looked at the young people with kindly, lively eyes. From time to time Vasilissa had murmured things to him. And he had valued her. "She has," he had said, "a by no means feeble headpiece." Towards Vladimir, however, he had seemed to have cooled. Vasilissa had

noticed this. It had pained her. For what reason? And Vladimir had not liked *him* on this occasion.

"Your Stepan Alexeivitch is very oily to you just now . . . He smells all over of incense. He is not a fighting Communist. An 'undergrounder'—that is all."

Vasilissa's "grouplet" had gone to pieces. But she had mustered more votes than had been expected. And, so, victory! . . .

Towards the end of the Convention Vladimir's time to depart had come. Again Vasilissa had found herself distracted. Here must she fit out a husband for a journey, and there was a Convention not yet ended! . . .

However, things had grown lighter in Vasilissa's soul. Again she had felt that her husband was not merely a husband, but also a "comrade." And she had been proud of him—he had greatly helped the "grouplet." The comrades had not wanted to let him go.

"Well, goodbye, Vasiuk! . . . My sparrow is going to remain all by itself under the roof . . . Now it will have no one to 'whimper' to about its mishaps. On the other hand, there will be no one to hinder you in your work." . . .

"And have you hindered me?" Vasilissa had clasped his neck, and caressed him. —

"You yourself said that a husband took up your time . . . You complained about having to do the housekeeping . . ."

"Do not recall that! . . . Without you it will be worse."

And she had hidden her head upon his breast.

"You are not only a husband to me ; you are a comrade as well. That is why I love you so."

They had exchanged a tender farewell. On excellent terms.

But when Vasilissa had seen Vladimir off, and was hurrying back to the Convention, suddenly she had felt : that, all the same, and despite the pleasantness of being together, it was for her, now left alone—freer. So long as her dear one had been there, all thoughts had been duplicated, the work had been shared. But now she could once more be there, at work, as wholly herself. It was both work and rest. With her husband she had had no real sleep.

"Have you speeded your husband ?" Stepan Alexeivitch had asked her at the Convention.

"Vladimir is gone."

"That is better. You were too much taken up with him."

Vasilissa had been surprised ; how had Stepan Alexeivitch come to know that ? . . . She had said nothing. She had always been reluctant to confess it, as like a wrong to her husband.

It was only just getting light, but already Vasilissa was on her legs. The train was due to arrive that morning. One needed to hasten and

tidy oneself, to rearrange one's clothes, so as to please Volodia, the dear husband. Fancy, seven months apart!

All was well in Vasilissa's heart—like spring, bright, joyous

The "Nepman's lady" was extended in her berth still, and, as she lay on her back, examining her features in a hand mirror. But Vasilissa was washed already, her curls had been carefully combed, and the new costume, the one which Grusha had made for her, donned. Vasilissa looked at herself in the compartment mirror, and saw only her eyes, but the eyes were so gleaming that the whole face appeared comely.

Everything was, seemingly, in order. This time Volodia should not reproach her for "walking in tatters."

A wayside station. Vasilissa looked through a window. Early morning, but the sun was hot. In the North spring was only just noticeable still, but here everything was in bloom. Even the trees. Species unfamiliar, peculiar. Leaves something like what the rowan had, but of colour more tender, and interspersed all over with white bunches. Like the lilac, and yet not like. And the scent struck straight through the window, sweet, luscious.

"What trees are those?" Vasilissa asked the conductor. "We have none such."

"White acacias."

White acacias? What lovely trees. The conductor plucked a few sprays, and gave them to Vasilissa. How they smelt! And so joyful

was Vasilissa in soul that she could have wept. Everything around her now was very interesting, beautiful. And, above all—"Above all, in an hour I shall be seeing Volodia, my desired, dear one."

"Shall we arrive soon?" she persisted to the conductor. It seemed to her as though the train would never start again. Still it remained stuck on a siding. It puffed, puffed, but did not move. At last it went.

Then a town became visible. A cathedral. Barracks. A suburb.—The platform of a station. Where, then, was Volodia? Where?

Vasilissa awaited him by an open window. And Volodia bobbed up from the other end of the car, and embraced her.

"Volodika! Ah, you . . . You startled me."

They kissed.

"Give me your bits of things as quickly as possible. And let him become acquainted: our Secretary. Ivan Ivanovitch, get the things together whilst we go to the motor-car. I now Vasia, have a pair of horses, my own cow, a motor-car . . . I should like also to set up some pigs. We have plenty of room, a whole farm. You will see it for yourself. You are going to live as a landowner's lady. The business is settling down. Not long ago we opened a branch of our own in Moscow."

Vladimir talked, talked in his eagerness to impart everything—the manner in which he was living now, and the ideas of which he was full. And Vasilissa, after seating herself in the car,

listened And though it interested her to hear of Volodia, she too wanted as soon as possible to tell her tale, as well as to learn from him how he had got on without her Had he fretted? Had he very much been longing for her?

They reached the house A detached residence, with a garden A pageboy in braided cap on guard at the door He helped them to alight from the car

"Let us see, Vasia, if you like things in our house Will they be better than in your little cage under the roof?"

A staircase with carpet. A mirror Entrance-hall Vasilissa took off her hat, threw aside her cloak. They entered the "reception rooms" Divans, carpets A dining room with large clock. Pictures in gilded frames, in them fruit, game hung on a peg

"Well? Are you pleased?" Vladimir was proud, beaming

"Yes," was Vasilissa's irresolute reply as she glanced around She did not yet know whether she was pleased All was so "strange," unfamiliar

"And here, our bedroom" And Vladimir flung wide the door The bedroom opened by two windows on to the garden And that at once *did* please Vasilissa.

"The trees!" she said joyfully "White acacias" And she hurried to a window

"But first look at the room, you can still run into the garden. Not bad, is it, what I have arranged for you? I myself collected

everything, and set it out. As soon as I took the house I began to wait for your coming."

"Thank you, dear one . . ." Vasilissa strained to kiss Volodia, but he, as though not remarking it, turned her by the shoulders towards a large mirror in a cupboard.

"You see how convenient that is. Before that mirror you will be able to behold yourself all over when you are dressing. Inside are shelves . . . For putting feminine clothing there, hats, and frippery . . ."

"As though I had any hats and frippery!" Vasilissa laughed. "A fine lady?!" But Volodia persisted: "Do you see what a bed that is? Coverlet of silk, quilted. I procured it with difficulty. It is our own; I did not take it over by the inventory. For night time one can light this pink lamp . . ."

Vladimir acted as Vasilissa's guide, pointed out to Vasilissa each trifle, was himself as delighted as a boy. Had he not arranged a comfortable nest for a wife? And Vasilissa listened, smiled at his pleasure, yet somehow felt uneasy in mind . . . What could she say? The bedroom *was* fine, "à la barin." Rugs, curtains, mirrors . . . Yet a "strange" room, somehow. As though she had not come into a room of her own. There was nothing there of what Vasilissa needed. She could not even perceive a little table on which to dispose her books, papers . . . Only was she pleased, really pleased, with the two windows which opened on to the garden, looked on to the white acacias.

"Now, tidy yourself up, have a wash, and we will go to luncheon," said Vladimir, and moved towards a window to lower the blind.

"But why should you do that?" And Vasilissa prevented him. "It is so nice to look at the garden."

"No, no. The blinds must be kept lowered during the daytime. Otherwise the stuffs will fade."

So the grey lattices were let down, and, like heavy eyelids, concealed the green of the garden which peered at the window. And the room became grey, depressing, and still stranger . . . Vasilissa washed her hands, combed her curls before a mirror.

"But is that really you? Is this the costume made from the material which I sent you?"

"Yes, from that same material." Vasilissa expected praises, looked at Volodia, asked for them.

"Show yourself well." Vladimir turned her this way and that. From his face Vasilissa could see that—he was not pleased! . . . "What made you think of puffing out your sides in such a manner? You have a slim figure, just the one for fashionable gowns. Why have you got yourself such a monstrosity as this?"

Vasilissa stood dismayed, flushed, guiltily blinking.

"How a monstrosity? Grusha declared that such was the fashion."

"As if your Grusha understood! . . . She has merely ruined the material. In it you look like

the wife of a priest. You had better take the dress off, and put on your ordinary clothes ; then you will look more like yourself . . . At present you are neither peahen nor jackdaw."

And, without remarking Vasilissa's mortified face, Vladimir went into the dining-room, to hurry up luncheon.

Vasilissa vexedly stripped off Grusha's creation, and in haste rearranged herself in her usual skirt and blouse with belt.

She felt distressed at heart. Two thin tears rolled on to the new-old blouse. But at once they dried themselves again. In Vasilissa's eyes there was a resentful coldness.

During luncheon there presented herself the "Director's service staff," Maria Semenovna, a woman stout, elderly, grave.

Vasilissa shook hands with her.

"That was unnecessary," Vladimir explained when Maria had left the dining-room. "Treat her from the standpoint of 'mistress,' or you will not escape trouble and pretensions."

Vasilissa looked at her husband with surprise.

"I absolutely fail to understand that."

Vladimir played the host to Vasilissa. But Vasilissa lacked zest. All was not well in her heart.

"Do admire the tablecloth—Morozovian linen.

And the same with the napkins. However, I had not ordered them to be set out; laundry charges are high."

"Whence did you get it all? You did not buy it all, did you?" Vasilissa looked at Vladimir sternly, as expecting a reply.

"The idea, now! . . . Why, do you know what such a setting costs nowadays? Millions! Do you suppose me really to have such a Director's salary that I could buy riches of that sort? All this I get by inventory, as Director. It is well that I came here whilst still it was possible to obtain things through one and another Department, and on the strength of old acquaintanceship. That game is played out now. No one would grant one such a setting now. Cash down, if you please. Of course, during the winter I *have* bought a thing or two at my own expense. There is that wardrobe with the mirror which is in the bedroom, the silken quilt. The lamp in the drawing room." . . . Vladimir enumerated deliberately, with satisfaction.

And in Vasilissa's eyes the coldness grew and grew. Vicious little flames had become lighted there. And Vasilissa's eyes looked, not brown, but green, like a cat's.

"How much, then, did *those* luxuries cost you?" In Vasilissa's voice there was a slight tremble, rage was boiling in it. But Vladimir did not notice the fact. He was eating a cutlet with sauce, and drinking beer.

"If one were to take everything into general account, and to add to it the discount which I

obtained for ready cash . . . There would result, if you please . . ."

Vladimir, with a pause designed to impress Vasilissa, named a thought-suggesting sum. He spoke, and raised his smiling eyes to Vasilissa. What a husband, eh?

"Vasia, what is the matter with you?"

Vasilissa had leapt up from the table, and bent her whole self towards him. Her eyes were vicious, green.

"Whence did you get that money? At once tell me whence?"

"What is this, Vasia? Now, calm yourself. Surely you cannot think that I got it dishonourably? Or do you not know the value of money? Reckon up my salary, and you will see for yourself." He named the monthly rate. The bonuses as well.

"You receive such a salary? Per month? Then how dare you, a Communist, waste it all upon this trash, upon baubles of all kinds? Want is growing! Want is all around! . . . Hunger . . . And the workless? . . . Have you forgotten them? Did you forget them as soon as you became Director?"

Vasilissa approached Vladimir, and questioned him with furious, greenish eyes. Yes, Gospodin Director. Mind how you answer. Vladimir did not retreat. He reasoned with Vasilissa, gently persuaded her, even subjected her to ridicule. She had lived like a sparrow under a roof, and knew not the value of money . . . Others earned still more, and yet did not live as he, Vladimir, did. *They really did* "flaunt."

However, Vasilissa was "not that sort" One could not get over her with words She had tusked the bit She demanded an answer as to why he was living "not like a Communist"? Why was he wasting money upon every sort of trash when hunger and want were around?

Vladimir saw that Vasilissa was not to be talked over Otherwise must he act "From the political aspect" must the matter be explained A Director's establishment had to be such-and-such Those were the instructions of "the Centre" Above all things did everything require to be done so that their enterprise should flourish, so that the firm should earn a full amount of profit And here Vladimir was insistent Let Vasilissa, first of all, look at what Vladimir had accomplished in a year In an empty spot he had knocked together a business, increased its profitability, and made it bid fair to equal any other three hundred in his "region" Vasilissa might be certain that, even if he himself lived "like a human being," he cared for every other employee, down to the humblest hand Let her probe into the enterprise from the beginning, and *then* start crying out He, Vladimir, had not expected that his friend Vasilissa, his wife-comrade, could arrive and at once pipe the same tune as his enemies To work thus would be difficult One might wear oneself out for a business' sake, and then, if you please! His wife too was going against him, betraying one to judgment

Vladimir was offended He boiled up Now he too had eyes which glowed like those of an

enraged wolf, and sparkled at Vasilissa as though they wished, with their wrath and offensiveness, to consume her . . . For distrust of him, for "condemnation" of him.

Vasilissa listened. She began to give in. Could he, after all, be right? Nowadays everything was on a different basis. The chief thing was that everything should be regular to exactitude, and the business be carried on. Let the people's wealth increase. She did not dispute with Vladimir in this regard.

"The fact that I obtain things for myself, and fit myself out with an establishment of my own—that is because one cannot live for ever in 'house-communes'! Are we any worse than the American workers? You should see how many of *them* live! A piano, a Ford of their own, a motor cycle"

Several times already had the grave Maria Semenovna peered into the dining-room. She wanted to serve the pancakes. And she saw that they had scarcely come together before they had begun to wrangle. It had used once to be thus with "the real gentry," with the folk with whom Maria had served up to the Revolution. What they had done the "Communists" did—they were all the same. She was vexed only because of the pancakes—they were standing too long.

Vladimir conducted Vasilissa over the business premises, the offices, the warehouses, and showed her the employees' living apartments. He took her into the counting house.

"Look at our books, such accuracy you will find at no one else's. See how I have established the business, and then accuse me of extravagance."

He asked the book keeper to explain to Vasilissa the "principles" of their accountancy. Simplified, but precise. At the Centre they specially praised them for their book keeping.

Vasilissa listened. She did not understand all, but it was manifest that they were "endeavouring," that they loved their work. And Volodia was all there, with his soul in the business. He led her to the employees' quarters. Purposely he questioned the wives of his fellow labourers as to whether they were contented.

Triumphantly he glanced at Vasilissa when everywhere the answer was the same. "Contented?" Considering the times of now, it could not be better. Owing to your care do we live, Vladimir Ivanovitch!

'You see, though you say that I am become a 'spendthrift'?' Believe me, I began by doing all I could to provide for the employees. I busied myself continually for them. Only later concerning myself. Do you perceive now how they live?' With the hands it is no worse than with

the offices staff. For them I have striven especially. I have done all that I could."

"Oh, you have done well! And they? What have they done for you?"

"How strangely you reason, Vasia. I and they are as one. What I am they are . . . Formerly the Director was one thing, and the workers were another. With us it is not so. You, Vasia, in your swamp, have become quite overgrown with moss."

This was said as in jest, but Vasilissa felt Vladimir to be displeased with her, as though offended with her. All day he conducted her about the "firm's" buildings. Vasilissa grew tired. In her temples there was a whizzing, in her side a stitch had begun, and her back was aching. Oh to lie down when they returned home, and sleep. In consequence of the journey her head seemed to be filled with the beat of the carriage wheels. But Volodia said that guests were coming to dinner presently. Vasilissa must "receive" them.

They returned home. They entered the hall. The pageboy opened the door, and stood as though he were awaiting orders.

Vladimir glanced at him, took out a small book, wrote a few words, and gave them to the pageboy.

"Now, quickly, Vasia! Without any loiterings! You are to hand the reply to me personally. Have you understood?"

And he turned towards Vasilissa, and looked at her in a strange sort of way. Half-guiltily, half-questioningly.

"Why have you, Vasiuk, got your little eyes so fixed upon me?" And his voice was uncertain, as though seeking to "ingratiate"

"Never mind So, it seems, the pageboy too is called Vasia?"

"He too Does it offend you that I should have two Vasias in the house? Ah, you! What a woman you are! Jealous Be reassured There is no Vasia in all the world greater than you And I love you alone"

He embraced Vasilissa, altogether endearingly He looked into her eyes He kissed her For the first time that day he caressed her Then, having embraced, they passed into the bedroom

The guests arrived for dinner Saveliev and Ivan Ivanovitch, Secretary of the Management Saveliev a tall, stout man in bright grey suit of tails Sparse hair, carefully parted, ring on index finger Eyes clever, with cunning in them And a smile on shaven face that was not nice, as though he observed everything, and "spat upon" everything so long as he himself lived well So it seemed to Vasilissa

When he greeted Vasilissa he made to raise her hand to his lips She wrested it away

"I am not used to that"

"As you will But I, you know, am never averse to kissing the hand of a young woman It is agreeable to me, and yet does not make the husband grow jealous Yet, Vladimir Ivanovitch, you ought to be jealous indeed Eh? Confess that you are!"

And he clapped Vladimir upon the shoulder without ceremony. And Vladimir laughed.

"In Vasia I have an exemplary wife ; there is no cause to be jealous about her."

"Of course, she does not take her example from her husband ?" And Saveliev gave Vladimir a wink, whilst Vladimir's eyes suddenly became large and nervous.

"I think that I too have never given cause."

But Saveliev caught him up :

"There, there ! We know you husbands. I myself have been a husband. Now I live merely as a bachelor."

Saveliev did not please Vasilissa ; decidedly he did not please her. But Vladimir carried on talk with him as with a friend. On business and on politics alike. Vasilissa preferred not to discuss politics with such a "speculator," or to laugh at the President of the Ispolkom.¹ Most certainly Volodia must be reasoned with, and put an end to this friendship.

During dinner they drank wine : the Secretary, Ivan Ivanovitch, had brought it in a wicker-cased flagon. The topic engrossing the company was the holding of some large stocks—the question of whether, if they should rise in value, they might not come too late upon the market.

Vasilissa listened, strove to catch the essence of the matter. But, in her opinion, all this was wholly unimportant, they were talking not of "the chief thing." And her temples worried her. They were twitching, aching. Even her

¹ Executive Committee.

eyes were painful. Oh, might they finish dinner as soon as possible.

When they rose from table Vladimir at once ordered out his motor-car ; he had to attend an important meeting in connection with transport.

"Surely you are not going to a meeting to-night ? On the first day of your wife's arrival ? This is not right, Vladimir Ivanovitch," said Saveliev, at the same time glancing with a covert grin at Vladimir.

"I cannot help it," jerked Vladimir in reply, as he lit a cigarette with absorbed attention. "I should have been only too glad to stay but for business "

"Business may differ from business," persisted Saveliev. And Vasilissa thought that he winked at Vladimir as though making fun of her—the detestable speculator. "In your place I should have put aside all business for to-day, and spent at least the first evening with my helpmeet. Business does not run away."

But Vladimir made no reply, and reached for his hat as though vexed.

"Shall we go, Nikanov Platonovitch ? "

They went.

Ivan Ivanovitch also took himself off.

Vasilissa remained alone. In the great, empty dwelling. Such an unfamiliar, alien one. She traversed the rooms. Melancholy. Lonely. Cold. She halted by a window. She lay down upon the bed with the silken quilt. And at once she fell asleep.

She awoke as from a nudge. Dark. She lit the lamp, looked at the clock. A quarter past twelve. Had she slept so long as that? After midnight. And still no Volodia.

Vasilissa arose, refreshed her face with water. She passed into the dining-room.

The table was covered for supper, the lamp burning. Empty and quiet.

In the other rooms darkness. She went into the kitchen. Maria Semenovna was tidying up.

"Is Vladimir Ivanovitch not returned yet?"

"Not yet."

"Does he always return from meetings as late as this?"

"He does so at different times."

Maria Semenovna was not garrulous. Morose.

"And do you wait up for him? Do not you go to bed?"

"I take turns with Vasia; one day I on duty, another day he."

"Will Vladimir Ivanovitch be supping?"

"He will if he brings home guests with him. Otherwise he will go straight to his room."

Vasilissa paused; she perceived Maria Semenovna to be occupied with her own affairs, and not even looking at Vasilissa.

Vasilissa returned to the bedroom. She opened a window. The night was calm, springlike, chilly. There was a keen smell of acacias. Frogs were

croaking with an unfamiliar loudness Vasilissa at first thought them to be night birds

The sky was dark, and there were many, many stars Vasilissa looked at the darkness of the garden, at the sky, at the stars And in her soul things grew peaceful and bright. Forgotten was Saveliev the "speculator," forgotten were the pin pricks to which Vladimir involuntarily had subjected her that day. Now Vasilissa felt, not in mind, but in heart, that she was come to him, to her beloved She was come to help him to "stand on the straight path" If one got mixed up with Nepmen, one, in spite of oneself, deviated from the path For that reason had he sent her, Vasia, his friend-wife, the summons

Vasilissa remembered that Vladimir had established a business, and was proud of it There indeed one had a worker! Now everything seemed to Vasilissa otherwise than it had done during the daytime Clearer, more intelligible, more cheerful

So deep in thought was Vasilissa that she did not hear the motor-car drive up, and Volodia approached over the rugs and tiles until he was at her very side She started at Volodia's voice

"What have you been thinking of so much my little Vasiuk? Eh?"

Volodia bent towards her, and in his eyes there were anxiety and tenderness

"You have come, dear one? I have been waiting so long!"

And she clasped his neck with her arms

Volodia caught her up as he had been wont to do during the first months of their love, and carried her about the room like a beloved child . . .

Vasilissa was delighted : Volodia loved her ! He loved her as of old ! . . The fool, she ! Why had she been offended with him ever since the morning ?

Together they drank tea. They carried on a conversation agreeably, soulfully. Vasilissa told him what she thought of Saveliev. It were best not to cultivate friendship with the man.

Vladimir did not argue with her. He confessed that he himself did not respect Saveliev. But the latter was a man very necessary. But for him, the business would never have been established. He possessed many old-standing connections ; merchants trusted him ; through him one could get " into contact " with those merchants. From him there had come much of what Volodia had learnt. The man in himself was, if you like it, only a non-dependable bourgeois of the first rank ; but for business he was irreplaceable. Hence was it that Volodia had stood up for him when the local authorities had, " with great good sense," put him under arrest. Moscow valued him. The local authorities had been given a fine wiggling on his account . . .

" But you wrote to me that he is not clean of hand ? "

" What was I to say to you ? He is our agent. And, of course, he does not forget himself But not more so than others. Besides, others pilfer, and do not do their business, whereas he

works not out of compulsion, but for conscience sake And he knows his work, and loves it "

Nevertheless Vladimir promised Vasilissa to associate less with Saveliev Service was service, but there was no call to carry on a friendship as well

They finished their tea, and, having embraced again, retired to the bedroom Vladimir pressed Vasilissa's head to his heart, kissed her curls, and said tenderly, meditatively

" You are such a dear little dove of mine .
Could it ever become a stranger to me ? No
other such as you, Vasia, can possibly exist I
love you alone, my Vasia Fury alone "

Vasilissa arose late Vladimir had long been at work But Vasilissa was not feeling well There was a stitch in her side, she was feverish, and she had started to cough Had she caught a chill on the journey ? Or had the thing come just of itself ? The day was summerlike, kindly But Vasilissa wrapped herself up in a shawl She had no desire to stir She would rather not, she thought, get out of bed Maria Semenovna arrived, crossed her hands on her stomach, stood in the doorway, and looked at Vasilissa She seemed to be awaiting something

" Good morning, Maria Semenovna "

" Good morning," she answered drily " What

would you order for dinner? Vladimir Ivanovitch said, when he went out, that it was you who would give me the dinner orders. There will be guests."

Vasilissa felt dismayed. Absolutely she did not know what to order. In her own place, in the commune, she had sat down always to a Soviet dinner.

Maria Semenovna saw that Vasilissa was genuinely "neither here nor there," so herself proposed some dishes. Vasilissa approved of all of them. Only did she enquire as to prices: would that not be very dear? Maria Semenovna compressed her lips.

"Well, if one wants a good dinner, one mustn't spare the money. Without money, nowadays, one can get nothing. The Communists have done away with those rations."

"And have you any money?"

"A little is left over from yesterday. I have not enough for to-day. Meat is expensive, and I shall have to buy meat."

"Vladimir Ivanovitch did not leave you any money, I suppose?"

"No, none. He said: 'Go to Vasilissa Dementievna; talk with her about it all.'"

What was to be done? Maria Semenovna was standing, awaiting money, not departing. Vasilissa had a little cash of her own put by, but, in view of such housekeeping, this would swiftly swim away, and she herself be left without a groat. It was awkward.

"Maybe," said Maria Semenovna, "you had

best, if you have any money of your own, hand it me for the housekeeping as 'credit,' and ask Vladimir Ivanovitch for it back again later. He will believe you."

Just the thing! Why had she not thought of it for herself?

So they decided thus

Maria Semenovna departed. And Vasilissa went out into the garden. She walked, walked along the paths. She was tired. She was not well. Then she lay down upon the bed again, took up a book. And over the book she fell asleep.

Vasilissa lay, tossed to and fro. Patches were burning in her cheeks. Heavy, stifling dreams kept tormenting her. She opened her eyes, and looked around. She felt angry with herself for lying there. She ought, rather, to be going to see about things in the town. She had not come to Volodia's just to be ill! Yet she had no desire to raise her head. She closed her eyes, and at once her thoughts became confused. The sleep was not sleep, the lethargy not lethargy. But also there was not recollection in full.

'Vasilissa Dementievna! Soon Vladimir Ivanovitch will be home to dinner. You had best change your dress whilst I rearrange the bed. He does not like untidiness in the rooms.'

It was Maria Semenovna standing over Vasilissa, like an elder "teaching her."

"Surely it is not so late?"

"Five o'clock . . . So you did not have any luncheon? I thought to arouse you, but saw that you were fast asleep. It is all from the journey. You have got overtired."

"Perhaps from the journey, or perhaps I have caught a chill. I feel shivering, somehow."

"You had best put on your woollen dress, and keep as warm as you can. But what is the good of the shawl? In it you merely muffle yourself up from the warmth."

"But my costume will be unsuitable then; my husband will not be pleased."

"How will it be unsuitable? Not the least scrap in the world. Of course, there *are* a lot of creases in the sides, and the waist is not in place . . . See, that is where the waist is worn . . . I too was a dressmaker once. So I have got a notion of the fashions. Let me recut the skirt . . . Just for love we'll remake the whole dress. Vladimir Ivanovitch shall not recognise it."

"Will it be ready for dinner?"

"What a thing to expect! No; you and I will do it without hurrying, bit by bit . . . And now do you put on your black skirt, and, over it, the jacket from the costume. That will be quite smart."

Never before had Vasilissa stood so much before a mirror. Meanwhile Maria Semenovna wrought upon her a change of style, and stuck her about with pins where a seam connected. From somewhere or another she produced a lace

collar. The effect obtained was agreeable. Simple, but neat. Vasilissa herself was pleased. What would Volodia say ?

She had just finished dressing when Vladimir arrived with the guests : a fellow member of the G.P. and his wife. On the fellow member there was a stubbly moustache, and he was dressed in dandified fashion, with yellow boots, laced to the knee. And he a " Communist " ! . . . He did not please Vasilissa. His wife was " all rigged out," like a " street woman " . . . Balloon like gown, white shoes, fur thrown over the shoulders, rings sparkling on fingers . . . But Vladimir kissed her hand. He jested. Of what were they speaking ? It was impossible to catch it. Trifles, all of it. Yet Volodia inclined himself so politely towards the guest, and his eyes so playfully did an " exchange of regard " . . .

Vasilissa sat with the colleague from the G.P. A Communist. Yet what to talk to him about she had not a notion.

During dinner they again drank wine. Vladimir and the lady guest tittered together as she whispered something into his ear. And then both of them laughed outright.

Vasilissa felt uncomfortable. But the husband paid no attention to the wife. She might not have been his wife at all. Strange ! Disagreeable.

They discussed jestingly the Fasts . . . The lady guest declared that she believed in God, and, whilst not observing the Fasts, went to Confession. What was this ? A colleague from the G.P., and yet he had married a " believer " ? . . .

Vasilissa frowned. She felt disapproving. And anger against Volodia caught hold of her. What sort of friends were these ?

Towards the end of dinner Ivan Ivanovitch arrived. He announced that Saveliev had taken a box at the theatre, and invited all.

" Shall we go, Vasia ? " Vladimir asked.

" With Saveliev ? " Vasilissa tried to catch her husband's eyes direct. But he made as though not understanding her.

" Why, yes ; with Nikanov Platonovitch. The whole company."

That night a new operetta was due. One would be amused. It was diverting, people said.

" No, I will not go."

" Why not ? "

" I am not well. I must have caught cold on the journey."

Vladimir looked at her.

" Sure enough, Vasia, what a face you have got . . . Your eyes have quite fallen in Give me your hand. Ooh ! but the hand is hot Of course you must not go . . . And I, in that case, will not go . . ."

" Oh, but why should that be ? Do go."

The guests also fell to beseeching Vladimir. They persuaded him. Go to the theatre he would.

In the hall Vladimir embraced Vasilissa in everyone's presence, and softly whispered to her :

" You, Vasia, are quite pretty to-night ! "

He begged Maria Semenovna to " keep an eye upon " Vasilissa.

"Go to bed as soon as possible, Vasia I shall return early I shall not stay until the end"

They departed

Vasilissa wandered through the rooms, and again depression overtook her

Such a life did not please her What in it was wrong she herself could not define Merely, all of this was unfamiliar, strange And she herself was "strange" here, necessary to no one . . . Volodia might love her, but only to a slight degree were his thoughts about her He caressed, kissed, and then departed ! It would have been another matter if he had had to go to a meeting or to work But to the theatre ! Why had he gone without her ? Had he not seen theatres enough during the winter ? Something was tormenting, gnawing at, Vasilissa She could not find words as to what precisely it was, but in her soul there was discomfort

"I will stay for a week," Vasilissa decided "I will see how things are with Volodia here, and then depart"

And at once there arose the questions whither ? Back home to the house-commune ? There there no longer remained a room for her—her garret under the roof To it Grusha, her friend, the sempstress, had removed Besides again the Fedoseievs, quarrels, cares, again to have to 'settle' the house, again to have to contend with all And she had not the strength for it And she had not the faith that one could save the affair That was the chief thing of all

No, Vasilissa had nowhere to go to

From the thought there became worse than ever in her heart the gnawing, the boring, the gimleting . . .

Vasilissa felt cold. She shivered, hid her hands in her sleeves. Backwards and forwards she walked through the dark, empty rooms. It seemed to Vasilissa that in that strange, unwelcome house some unexpected misfortune was going to befall . . . Calamity was on the watch.

A presentiment?

Might, then, Communists believe in presentiment? On the other hand, what, what did all this mean? Whence this despondency? Intangible, ineluctable, unbidden?

Vladimir returned early, as he had promised. Vasilissa was reading a book in bed.

He seated himself near Vasilissa, asked her how she was. They looked into one another's eyes. And Vasilissa found it strange that Vladimir's eyes should be so serious and careworn. As though they had in them a sort of grief.

"What is the matter with you, Volodia? How melancholy you are! . . ."

Volodia thrust his head into the pillow beside Vasilissa, and said, so pitifully:

"It is difficult to live, Vasia . . . You do not know how difficult for me it is! You only see one side of my life . . . And you do not try to

understand me . . . If only you could have looked into my heart whilst I was worried during the winter you would not have condemned, but have pitied, me ! In you, Vasia, there is a kind little heart."

Vasilissa stroked Volodia's head, and felt sorry for him. She comforted him. And sorry for Volodia though she was, she was also joyful in soul. It seemed to her that they were grieving with one spirit, suffering with a common pain . . . It *was* difficult to act Director over a proletariat. She said to him as much.

But Volodia shook his head sadly.

"Not that alone, Vasia—not that . . . Yet another thing is tormenting me . . . It gives me no rest !"

"A plot against you, is it ?"

Volodia was silent, as though he wanted to say something, but could not decide to.

Vasilissa embraced him.

"Tell me, dear one, what is tormenting you ?" She pressed her head to his shoulder.

"What is this smell of scent that is coming from you so ? When did you scent yourself like that ?" She raised her head, and looked at Volodia.

"Scent ?" Volodia seemed confused, and moved away from Vasilissa. "It must have been when I had myself shaved at the hairdresser's to-day. *He* scented me."

Vladimir arose. Long, assiduously he lit a cigarette. And he went away from Vasilissa. He said that still, that night, he had to sort some papers.

Vasilissa kept coughing. She was not well. She was feverish. There was a stitch in her side. She pulled herself together whenever Vladimir was present. But he noticed it. The cough would not let him sleep. Vladimir had to have a bed made up for him on a sofa in the drawing-room.

The days dragged along. Empty. Without work. Merely petty domestic cares. Vladimir was "near" over the housekeeping, yet demanded that everything should be "as is proper." Vasilissa spent money of her own upon the housekeeping; she disliked hearing it when Volodia said, as though reproachfully:

"Surely you have not yet spent all your money upon the housekeeping? . . . One can never lay by enough for you and the rest here."

As though it was Vasilissa who invited guests, and demanded three-course dinners! Yet Vasilissa could not complain of Volodia. In the other respect he was solicitous; Vasilissa's health greatly disturbed him. He himself fetched a doctor. The doctor diagnosed "debility," and also irregularities in the right lung. He bade her lie more in the sunshine, and feed herself well. Thereupon Volodia started urging upon Vasilissa that she must do all that the doctor had said. *Was* she doing it? Also, he bade Maria Semenovna look after Vasilissa, that she might eat in due season. He procured Vasilissa some cocoa. He himself drove in his motor-car to obtain for

Vasilissa a folding garden chair, and let her warm herself in the sunshine. Volodia was attentive.

Whenever he came home he at once sought Vasilissa. Yet they saw but little of one another. Vladimir was occupied. It was a feverish time—the market on edge. Careworn was Volodia, moody, and, as it were, unhappy . . .

Vasilissa was lying in the folding chair on the lawn, and warming herself, luxuriating, like a lizard. She kept turning herself from the one side to the other. She was sunburnt. She had become like a gipsy woman. It was strange so to live . . . with neither work nor cares. Nor pleasure either. It was like a slumber. Continually, so it seemed to her—one fell asleep, and found oneself again “at home” In the house-commune, the Zhilotdiel would be recalled; the comrades, Stepan Alexeivitch; Grusha . . . Even Madame Fedoseiev. Life had been difficult there, but brighter . . .

Vasilissa was awaiting Volodia. He had promised to return early to-day. Vasilissa had kept fancying “To-day Volodia and I will have a thorough talk about everything. Soul to soul.” But day had succeeded day, and the conversation had not eventuated. Sometimes there had been guests, sometimes business.

Savelev showed himself no more. But other guests did—business managers, alien to Vasilissa. Uninteresting. All their talk turned upon loading and unloading of goods, upon manufactures, upon parkings, upon discounts, upon accretions of value.

Vasilissa was lying in the folding chair. She was looking admiringly at the tree tops—how they stood out against the blue sky . . . Vasilissa was listening to the manner in which grasshoppers were chirping in the herbage. In the depths of the garden birds were singing as though one were striving against another . . .

Vasilissa arose, walked along an overgrown path of the garden, pushed her way into some bushes of flowering lilac. How they smelt ! She began to tie together a bouquet . . . And beside her, z-z-z . . . a bee buzzed, settled upon a bloom of the lilac, and arranged its wings. "Oh, the brave one, it is not afraid of a human being !" smiled Vasilissa. And suddenly all became so well in her soul, so light, that even she herself was surprised. She looked about her. She seemed to be seeing the garden anew . . . The green herbage . . . The lilac, pink, brilliant, fragrant . . . The little pond, coated with ooze, whilst in it frogs croaked, exchanged notes . . .

How fair ! How marvellously fair !

Vasilissa was afraid to stir, afraid lest there should depart from her heart the unexpected joyousness, light-winged, bright . . . It was as though until that hour Vasilissa had never known, never felt, never understood what it meant "to live." But now, behold, she did understand. Not to fret, not to hurry, not to work, not to enjoy oneself, not to strive, but just to live . . . To live like the little bee that was circling over the lilac ; like the birds that were exchanging warblings amongst the boughs ; like the

grasshoppers that were chirping in the herbage To live ! . . To live ! . . To live ! . . Why could she not remain wholly, for ever amongst the lilac bushes ? Why could not the human being become as God's other creatures ? She bethought her of the word "God's," and felt vexed with herself. Since when had she taken to remembering God ? It was all due to lack of employment . . . To a "bourgeois life" on Volodia's substance. In this way one could convert oneself into a veritable Nepman's lady.

Vasilissa hastened towards the house ; she wanted no longer to luxuriate in the garden.

But the sense of joyousness did not pass. There was a sort of lightness in her. Could it merely be that strength had accrued to her, her health returned ?

She had scarcely reached the bedroom, and placed the lilac in a vase, when Vladimir drove up in his motor-car.

And straight to Vasilissa he went.

"They have begun ! For a long time past the mischief-makers, the intriguers, have left me in peace . . Now they have betaken themselves to their old game with new energy . . . And they have just summoned me to the Control Commission . . . They have hatched a case against me We will watch out yet . . . We will yet see who is to win !"

Vladimir tore about the room, and lodged one hand behind his back—a sign that he was disturbed.

And they had worked in his "*Anarchism*"

again, and his "non-amenity to discipline," and the devil only knew what else ! . . . One might burst one's skin to set a business upon the rails, yet, in lieu of help, those Ispolkom fellows merely thought how to sprag the wheels.

"If again they trap me in this way, I shall leave the Party. Yes, leave it I shall ! There will be no need to threaten me with exclusion ! . . ."

Vasilissa saw that the matter was serious. A pang shot to her heart. Was not this the calamity which had been on the watch ? But she made no sign. She consoled Vladimir—reasoned with him.

"And your precious Stepan Alexeivitch too is a nice one ! . . . They asked of him a testimonial to me . . . So he, kindly note, could find nothing better to say than to praise me as a worker, and, as regards the rest, to remark (so I have discovered) that I am terribly 'ambitious' and 'morally unstable' ! Are they, then, ecclesiastics, that they judge a man not for his work, not for his affairs, but for his morality ? . . . I live not 'in Communist fashion' ! Will they, then, bid me enrol myself a monk ? And do they themselves act any better ? By heavens, they do not bring the Manager of the Agitotdiel¹ to judgment, although he has abandoned his wife and three children, and now is married to a street wench. Is that, in your opinion, permissible ? Is that, pray, 'Communist fashion' ? Why only from *me* do they demand that I don the cowl ?

¹Department of Agitation, of Propaganda.

and what business, in any case, have they with my personal life?" ✓

At this point Vasilissa ceased to agree with Volodia. The K K.¹ was right: it ill befitted a Communist to take example from the bourgeois. A Communist, and a Director at that, ought himself to be an example for all.

"Then in what, damn it, do you see my fault? Wherein, tell me for heaven's sake, lies my 'non Communism'? That I do not live in mire? That, in duty to the Service, I am obliged to cultivate acquaintanceship with every sort of riffraff? Then write me out an Instruction as to whom I am to admit to the house! As to how many chairs I am to keep in the house . . . As to how many pairs of trousers a Communist may possess . . ."

Vladimir was boiling. He argued with Vasilissa. But Vasilissa was glad of the opportunity of expounding all that, of late, had been accumulating in her soul. She herself did not know well what was wrong, but merely it seemed to her that Vladimir did not live, did not behave, as was proper for a Communist. However, that was what Vladimir wanted, and she herself did not really believe that matters would go the worse because a Director had mirrors and carpets in his abode! . . . She did not believe, on the other hand, that matters would go any the better because stove-shelves were shared with Savelievs and so forth, and Vladimir kissed the hands of "puppets" . . .

"And you too! . . . Oh, I knew it! . . .

¹ Presumably Control Committee

I guessed it was so. You have come not as a friend, but as a judge. You are singing in unison with my enemies. So I know now that you despise me as much as they do . . . Only, why do you not say it all straight out? Why conceal your enmity against me? Why harass me?"

Vladimir had turned pale; his eyes were flashing; in his voice there were offendedness and rage. Vasilissa could not understand him. Why had he taken umbrage at her? Nowadays one could not get a word in edgeways with him . . . He had begun to be terribly arrogant! Might he yet be sorry for it! . . .

"Ah, Vasia, Vasia! . . . I had not expected this of you. I had not thought that you would desert me at the critical moment . . . Evidently I calculated amiss . . . Now let everything go to the devil! If it means ruin, let it be ruin! The end is the same!" And he caught at the table in such a way that the vaseful of lilac tilted awry . . . Down on to the floor the fragrant pink bunches fell and scattered themselves, whilst a diamond stream of water trickled over the silken tablecloth.

"Look what you have done!"

Vladimir waved a hand, and walked away to a window. There he stood in sullenness, whilst in his eyes there was pain. Vasilissa looked at him, and, as usual—pitied him. It was not easy for him, Vladimir, to live. And nowadays it was difficult for any proletarian to do so. Come, distinguish: what is regular? What is permissible?

' Now, enough, Volodia ! Why have you given way in courage ? It is early yet The matter has still to be examined There is no crime to be imputed to you All the more must it be your constant insubordination Wait, and I myself will go to the Committee, and learn the what and the how Possibly everything yet will be transformed "

Vasilissa stood beside Vladimir, laid a hand upon his shoulder, strove to look into his face But Vladimir seemed not to notice it He remained sullen He was thinking his own thoughts He did not hear Vasilissa What was the matter with him ? Why had he now become, as it were, more distant, " not a comrade " ?

Vasilissa fell silent She too became thoughtful She no longer had joy in her heart Only care Grey, oppressive

Next day Vasilissa went to the Partkom ¹ The more she had questioned Vladimir, the more had she become anxious in soul The accusations were grave, even if also unfair How, then, would the matter yet unravel itself ?

Vasilissa walked through the, to her, unfamiliar town, enquired as to streets of passers by, yet did not really see the town Her wish was as

¹ Party Committee

quickly as possible to reach the Partkom. She was uneasy in mind.

A detached house. A red flag. The well-known standard, as though she had been in her own gubernia.¹ And suddenly Vasilissa became joyful, for she had wearied without "her own people." The comrades who came to see Vladimir she did not account members of the Party.

Vasilissa asked where the cabinet of the Predgubkom² might be. A lad was sitting in wait for "enquirers."

"Write down who and why. Perhaps he will receive you to-day, but perhaps he will put you off until Thursday."

So much for "bureaucratism"! This did not please Vasilissa. But there was no help for it. She seated herself at a table. She filled up a form.

"Here! Take that to the Secretary." And the form passed from the hands of the lad "for enquirers" into those of a messenger lad. "And do you go up the staircase, and then to the right along the corridor. Go straight through a door marked 'Reception Room.' Wait there." The lad thus explained, and on his face there was boredom.

But suddenly, all at once, he brightened up: "Manka! Manka! how come *you* to be here?"

A young girl in a petticoat to her knees and a smart hat flashed her eyes coquettishly.

"To see an acquaintance . . . Why should I not be paying a visit to your Partkom?"

¹ Province.

² President of the Committee of the Gubernia.

"A street girl," Vasilissa decided, and again became uncomfortable in soul. Once upon a time such a wench would never have dared to call upon an "acquaintance" in the Parthom . .

Vasilissa walked along the lengthy, bright corridor, past her flashed male and female employees. Life in the Parthom did not stand still. All had their work. Only Vasilissa obscured the sky for nothing.

In the Reception Room a private secretary, a beardless youth with an important air, asked Vasilissa her name, and verified it with a list, the list a hunchbacked girl kept.

"Your turn will not be soon. You have no business by appointment. You will have to wait."

Vasilissa seated herself against a wall. Others too were waiting. Some workmen with lean, tired faces in worn peajackets. They were conferring together. Manifestly a deputation. A tall, well-dressed gentleman in spectacles, a "spec" of course, was reading an old newspaper. An old woman, a worker in a kerchief, was sitting, sitting, and sighing. Hence it seemed as though she were saying: our sins are grievous!

A Red soldier, healthy, young, rejoicing in life. A peasant in a short jacket, and, beside him, a priest in a cassock. For what purpose had this last come to the Parthom?

"Your turn, my father," just then the secretary said. And he admitted the "father" to the

Predgubkom's cabinet. "He belongs to the Living Church," he then explained to the sitters. "A very clever man ! . . He will be extremely useful."

There kept running in female employees—Communists, cropped, in old skirts, businesslike, preoccupied, with papers for signature, with questions to the secretary. They whispered with him, and ran out again.

There entered a fashionably dressed "pseudo-barinia," but, in reality, the wife of a responsible worker. A non-Party woman. Vasilissa knew her. She asked at once to be admitted, out of her turn. She had with her a note from a member of the Ts.K.¹ She had come from Moscow. She had no time to wait. The secretary at first was firm. At the sight of the Ts.K.'s form he wavered . . . Then he decided that he must not go beyond his instructions. Once a matter proved to be "personal"—take your turn, if you please. The "pseudo-barinia," as Vasilissa mentally called her, was vexed. She could not understand how such a system could exist in a province ! . . In Moscow they would have admitted her at once. In Moscow everyone contended with the bureaucracy, but here—otherwise ! What regulations they had devised ! . . . "The chinovniks !"

She sat down, offended, carefully straightening the folds of her dress.

There burst into the place a fat man with cap on back of head, coat unbuttoned, well-fed, boisterous. "A Nepman," Vasilissa decided.

¹ Central Committee.

"Comrade secretary, what sort of a system is this of yours? My minutes are precious, for a shipment is in progress, and you hinder me with every sort of foolishness, and demand that I fill up various forms . . . Take in my name—Kondrashev."

And he cocked his nose as complacently as though he had been "Lenin himself." Vasilissa felt all her old hatred of the bourgeois effervesce in her. *Here* was one who ought to be arrested and judged. That jowl, that jowl, how mean it was!

The secretary begged pardon. It was impossible, he said—instructions . . . The Nepman would not listen. He urged, he demanded. He insisted. The secretary went into the cabinet to "announce." He returned apologetic.

"Comrade, the Predgubkom requests you to be seated. After two more appointments he will receive you."

"What ways of doing things, the devil knows! Just you try doing business with these people! . . . And, besides, they make demands upon us, threaten us . . . They curse us for saboteurs. Who really is the saboteur is—a question."

He wiped the sweat from his face with a handkerchief. The "pseudo-barin" looked at him approvingly. The gentleman in the spectacles, the "Spec", looked at both disapprovingly. But the workmen were occupied with their own business. They seemed not to have noticed that the Nepman was creating a stir.

Theirs was the next turn. After them, the gentleman in spectacles.

It was tedious waiting. Vasilissa walked to a window. A small garden, and, in it, two children running about as they chased a dog. Their ringing, childish voices came borne upward.

"Catch Bobka by the tail ! . . He growls He won't bite . . . Bobka ! here ! . . Catch, catch Bobka ! ! . ."

Vasilissa's turn. The Predgubkom was a small man. He could not at first be seen behind the large table. With goatee beard, in spectacles, shoulders so thin that the bones seemed to be protruding from under his coat.

He darted at Vasilissa an unfriendly glance, extended a hand, but did not rise.

"On what business ? Personal ?" Drily, as though Vasilissa had been a "petitioner."

"I have come to introduce myself to the Committee." ("I had better not begin upon Volodia's case straight off," Vasilissa mentally decided. "One could not have a plain talk with this man.")

"I have only just arrived in the town."

"So I had heard. Visiting us for long ?"

"On two months leave, but probably, owing to poor health, I shall be continuing my stay."

"Shall you rest, or would you undertake work of some sort ?" He put the question, but did not look at Vasilissa—merely examined documents. He seemed to be meaning : "I have no time to engage in fiddle-faddle. No time at all."

"I could not undertake permanent work. But you might use me for agitation."

"It would be possible so to use you. Next week we begin a campaign for passage to a bread budget. You, I have heard, are a 'Spec.' on the housing question?" Again he passed a glance over Vasilissa before again burrowing into his papers.

"I worked for two years on the Zhilotdiel . . . I organised house-communes."

"Indeed! That is interesting. Pray teach us how to transfer house-communes to self redemption."

"I could not do that," Vasilissa replied, with a shake of the head. "As soon as we began to pass to self redemption everything went to pieces with us. House-communes should be, rather, schools, and foster the Communistic spirit . . ."

"Well, you know, I never have time now to occupy myself with these matters. Do you give us a working start, a financial estimate . . . So as to lighten the State Budget. But what is that of yours about carrying on education through housing methods? There you would have a school, a university." And the Predgubkom smiled condescendingly, as from a height. The fact vexed Vasilissa.

She rose abruptly.

"Good-bye, comrade."

"Until we meet again." This time he looked at Vasilissa attentively. Vasilissa, in like fashion, looked him full in the eyes. Coldly.

"You had better go to the Agitotdiel, and get yourself registered there. Look in also at the Zhenotdiel¹, there workers are always wanted."

¹Wives Department

"I should like, besides, to ask you about Vladimir Ivanovitch's affair?" As she put the question she eyed the Predgubkom severely. I know, she as good as said, that the affair is the work of your hands! . . .

"What can I tell you?" the Predgubkom replied with a frown as he shifted his cigarette from the one corner to the other of his twisted mouth. "It smacks of gravity. I have heard of you that you are a Party comrade of very good calibre It is not for me to speak to you of Vladimir Ivanovitch! . . ."

"Of what are you accusing him? Vladimir Ivanovitch has done nothing criminal, nor ever could do so."

"It depends upon what one calls 'criminal'! . . . But, at the same time, I cannot enter into this affair. Make enquiries of the K.K. My respects to you."

He bowed, and delved again into his papers. Do not disturb me, he as good as said. You can see that other business awaits me.

Vasilissa left the President's room. Sullen. Angry. In her gubernia they would not have received even a non-member of the Party thus! . . She had gone to her own people, and seemed to figure there as a stranger. Vladimir was right—they had made chinovniks of themselves, turned themselves into Governors

Vasilissa walked along, and became plunged in thought. She did not notice it when she came face to face with a fellow native of her part of the country. With Mikhailo Pavlovitch,

an ex worker in the machine department of the very same factory as once had employed Vasilissa

"My fathers ! whom do I see the fair Vasilissa ! My compliments "

"Mikhailo Pavlovitch ! You dear friend of mine ! "

They embraced, exchanged kisses

"Have you come to pay your husband a visit ? "

"And you—what are you doing here ? "

"Cleansing the Party I am a member of the K K I cleanse, cleanse, but still there remains much uncleanness "

He laughed into his flaxen beard His eyes were kindly He was as "hearty" as he had always been

They were glad of one another Questions and relations Mikhailo Pavlovitch dragged off Vasilissa to his "little cage" near the Parade Formerly, in the time of "the masters," a waiter had lived in it When Mikhailo Pavlovitch had arrived he had settled in it temporarily at first, and then remained there The "cage" was unostentatious a bed, beside it a basket with provisions, two chairs a table, on the table, newspapers, glasses, tobacco . .

The two natives of the same town were glad of one another, they could not talk sufficiently They ran over comrades known to them They recalled their gubernia's affairs, as to what was "doing well," and as to what had "weakened" They touched upon the N.E.P For Mikhailo

Pavlovitch the very term stuck in his throat. And he did not love overmuch the Predgubkom.

"Petty, and puffs himself. 'I,' and again 'I'!... Of course, he works a lot—energetic, and no fool... *But* everything must come from him alone. Like a candle set in a window to show that 'I am President'! That does not please the workers. They say: 'The Convention established "democratisation," but we have got, instead, a huge bureaucracy, only a privileged officialdom.' So intrigue goes on. Groups are being formed. That hinders the work. It cleaves the authority of the Party. The Predgubkom ought to be the 'uniter' of all, a sort of, as it were, 'father,' quite impartial... But this man only harasses the public."

"By the way, Mikhailo Pavlovitch, my dear friend, how is Vladimir's case getting on? Wherein lie the accusations? Are they serious? Speak of them to me as to a friend."

Mikhailo Pavlovitch smoothed his flaxen beard. He took thought. And he acknowledged: that the case was not, in itself, worth an empty egg shell. If for such doings Communists now were to be haled to judgment, it would be necessary to arraign almost all of them. The whole affair had begun from the fact that, when Vladimir Ivanovitch had first arrived, he had not at once come to an understanding with the Predgubkom. Each of them was ploughing his own furrow. The Predgubkom 'ordered,' and Vladimir Ivanovitch 'did not obey.' He said—myself, if you please this does not concern. It is in the Party course,

but I am not subject to you—I deal only with the Khozorgans¹. Let *them* judge as to how I work? Conflicts took place. Reference was made to Moscow. And Moscow, as it were, supported the Predgubkom, and, on the other hand, took the 'Director' under its protection. Nothing was gained. Both of them figured as in the right.

Then—more. Neither the one nor the other would yield. The least thing, and each of them sent an "information" to Moscow. And so it went on . . . A Commission had been dispatched from Moscow, to enquire into the bickerings. The sternest possible resolutions had been registered . . . And the Commission had barely departed when—again the quarrel had been in progress.

Now the matter was being examined in the K K. Mikhailo Pavlovitch himself wanted to conclude the matter peacefully. The "Director" was working for himself, as was proper in the industrial line. The Centre was satisfied with him. There were no direct charges against him, and, in Mikhailo Pavlovitch's opinion, there could not be, for he knew the American, the Anarchist, and could recall him in the gubernia ever since '17. They had "taken counsel" together. And as for the fact that he "lived spaciouly," that his conduct was "not conciliatory," and his bearing "not comradely," who now was not guilty of these things?

¹ Presumably, Bolshevik for Industrial Organs, or Institutions.

² The translator has reproduced this paragraph just as it stands in the Russian text.

But the Predgubkom and the other members of the Commission were standing out for "giving the case serious procedure." For showing, through example of a "Director," that the Party did not stroke one over the head for such acts. So that others should not get into the habit.

"What, then, are those 'acts' on Vladimir Ivanovitch's part? If it is that he has a luxurious establishment, the establishment is not Vladimir's, but the Treasury's, the 'Director's.' "

"The matter does not lie only in the establishment. He arouses the doubt: whence (they say) the money for living in two houses?"

"How in two houses? Do you suppose that Vladimir Ivanovitch has been supporting me as well? . . . Oh, what a thing to think! I put by money of my own for housekeeping, if you want to know! For the reason that Vladimir has not sufficient of *his* own . . . And his service demands that there should be dinners there, and receptions of all kinds."

Mikhailo Pavlovitch listened to Vasilissa, and in his eyes there was a sort of pity for her. This irritated Vasilissa. Why should he pity her? Because she was standing up for an "Anarchist"? Mikhailo Pavlovitch had not approved of Vasilissa's choice at the time when she had allied herself with Vladimir.

"Why are you staring at me? Do you not believe me? And how could you imagine that I take money from him?"

"What I say, my dear, does not refer to

yourself . . . The trouble is that he has all sorts of unsuitable acquaintances . . . ”

He spoke, and then looked at Vasilissa as though to verify what he meant

“ Is it at Saveliev that you are hinting ? ”

“ Well, yes , at him as well . . . And at others . . . ”

“ Saveliev has ceased visiting us . . . Vladimir has promised to have no more to do with him . . . Only in connection with business, of course. And as for the rest, business necessitates that as well ! He himself does not find many of those people congenial , they are alien to us But what can we do ? They take part in the business—are shareholders, technicians . . . ”

“ M-yes,” drawled Mikhailo Pavlovitch He stroked his beard, and reflected.

Vasilissa, meanwhile, told him of much else that was unintelligible to her. She herself was confused at times what was wrong, what right ? Why was a thing possible, yet not proper for a Communist ? And people became different. And work—became other than it had been . . .

Vasilissa could have sat long with her fellow townsman, but Mikhailo Pavlovitch was sent for—summoned to the K.K

On parting they agreed : that Mikhailo Pavlovitch should render Vasilissa acquainted with some “ nice children,” from a factory. And as regards “ the matter of the Director,” he would ponder upon it Only let Vasilissa know that if Vladimir went on further as he was doing now, it would—entail a threat of exclusion.

"At last, then, my Fury has returned ! Whither has she been to fight ? To the Partkom ? Well, what did they say there ?"

Vladimir met Vasilissa actually on the verandah. Manifestly he had been watching for her at a window.

Vladimir listened to Vasilissa, walked about the room, smoked. His face was careworn.

"You say that they accuse me of living in two houses ? But what business would it be of those hypocrites, humbugs, if I lived in five ? Given accuracy in my routine, and that I do not steal stock, and that I do not take a single bribe, what else matters ?"

Vasilissa stood perplexed again : what meant that "two houses" ?

Concerning Saveliev she insisted firmly. In that quarter an end must be put to things. Let Saveliev go to the office. But hither let him not move a foot. And about the firm's workers she asked : was it true that Vladimir "was rude to" them, cursed them foully ?

"All moonshine ! Fiddlesticks. Calumny. Of course, there *are* times when I exclaim, let fly some language. For that there is reason ! I do not do it for nothing. It would not do to let those fellows get too slack. Especially the porters. They are a lazy, non-conscientious lot."

Of the fact that exclusion was threatened Vasilissa did not speak. And certainly it could

not have been soothing to his spirit. On the other hand, she decided that she herself would now arrange life in the house. "Guests" should no longer come trailing thither without necessity. The dinners should be simpler. The horse, the one which Vladimir had bought for himself, must be sold. What use were horses when there was a motor car?

And again Vladimir boiled up. That horse of his was a riding and driving horse. It would go even under a lady's saddle. One could not obtain such a horse nowadays. It had been purchased at second-hand, and cheaply. A horse—well, nowadays a horse was so much "capital."

"'Capital'! Why should you set out to become a capitalist? Give up, Vladimir, these habits of yours. May you not have cause one day to lament them!"

'Are you supposing that they will eject me from the Party? What sort of a Party has it come to be if it ejects for 'morals'? Let it do so! I shall merely go on working with the Khozorgans!'

Vasilissa could see that he was speaking thus out of irritation. She did not quarrel, but she held to her own, that life must be changed. Let everything be more modest and quiet. And, above all, let "undesirable acquaintances" be kept at a greater distance. Vasilissa promised to speak to Mikhailo Pavlovitch on the subject, and, at a pinch, to go to Toporkov in Moscow.

Vasilissa was sitting on the windowsill—so

thin, pale . . . all eyes. And even they were not looking cheerful.

Vladimir glanced at her. He threw his cigarette on to the floor. He approached Vasilissa, embraced her, pressed her firmly, firmly to his heart.

"Vasia ! you are my tender friend ! . . . Do not desert me, Vasia, now ! . . . Support me . . . Teach me . . . I myself know that I am in fault ! . . . In fault, not before them, but before you . . ."

And he laid his head upon her knees. Like a "little one" ! . . .

"How are you in fault, Volodia ?"

Vladimir did not reply.

"In the fact that you go against yourself ? betray your proletarianism ? . . . In that you are guilty, not to me, but to yourself . . ."

"Surely, Vasia, you do not understand ? You do not feel ? . . . Ah, Vasia, Vasia !"

Vladimir moved away from Vasilissa. It was as though he were vexed. And the next moment, as though he wished to break off the conversation, he asked :

"But is dinner ready ? I am eager for it. I have not had a bite since morning."

Vasilissa was returning from a Convention. She had attached herself to the mat-making women. She visited them in their factory. She was helping an organiser to arrange the work.

It was pleasant again to work "with the masses" It was as though she had returned home She and Mikhailo Pavlovitch often saw one another She had formed a friendship with his "children" Not that a group had become welded, but they held together, and "warred" with the Predgubkom Also, they did not approve of the "Industrialists" They merely respected a certain old man who held the office of Steelcasting Director He was "one of us" he had not separated himself from the masses, nor "Governorised himself"

Vladimir's affair kept failing to come up for investigation Mikhailo Pavlovitch said that new material had eventuated—"not good" material He advised Vasilissa that Vladimir had better be as cautious as possible, and avoid Saveliev Behind Saveliev c toward True, th protest, but the him to carry on as he liked

Anxiety gnawed at Vasilissa's heart She felt offended on Vladimir's behalf Especially at the present time He worked from morning till night He would come home, and at once sit down to his account books He was, by instructions from the Centre, reorganising the book keeping He had invited to help him a "Spec", a bank official, and together the two would pore over the shiny ledgers until three o'clock in the morning Vladimir was growing thin He had

* Presumably, Gosudarstvennoe Pravlenie, or State Administration

begun to sleep badly. Naturally : the work now was double. He was carrying on a responsible business. And there was plotting, intrigue ! . . . Vasilissa's heart ached for him.

Tenderness for him flooded her soul.

No longer did guests frequent the house. Of Saveliev there came neither word nor hint. He seemed to have departed somewhere. And better so. Nor did Vladimir visit either the theatre or acquaintances. Every evening he was at home. Careworn, silent, grim.

Vasilissa did not know what to devise to distract his thoughts. What to devise to lighten toil for her friend-husband.

Only at the "Matmakers" did she forget about him—so long as she was at Party work amongst the women hands there. Their life was a sorry one. The rate of salary was low, and constantly opportunity to review its proportions failed, and constantly the authorities were late with its payment. The "Industrial Administration" had come to nothing. Poor creatures ! Vasilissa pressed close to them. She defended the matmakers' interests, and set a profsouz¹ upon its legs. She advanced matters to the point of an "Arbitrational."

Vasilissa bustled about at the factory, forgot about everything else, and noted not the day . . . They would return home on foot—Vasilissa and the woman organiser, Liza Sorokina. A working-woman. Young. Sensible. Vasilissa liked her. As they went they used to confer. They marked

¹ Professional (trade) union.

out a "plan" Whom else to "set upon," how to push forward the work to an "Arbitrational"

They would arrive at Vasilissa's house before she was aware of it

One day she entered, and Vladimir came to meet her Somehow he looked peculiar that day—joyful His eyes were beaming, a subtle little flame was burning in them

As soon as Vasilissa entered he embraced her

"Now, Vasiuk! Congratulate me! A letter from Moscow I am to receive a new appointment Promotion, so to speak I am to superintend a whole 'region' Only two more months shall I have to be here Until I have completed affairs So we shall set the K K's nose upon its face for it! What will the Predgubkom say now?"

"Do not rejoice too much! Take care that your case does not injure your appointment"

"Fiddlesticks! The Centre will not haul me over to wrong now I have become necessary to it now" He exulted like a boy He fondled, kissed Vasilissa

"Also, my tireless Fury, I have got something in store to delight you A little gift!"

Laid out on the bed in the bedroom there was a length of blue silk, and, beside it, some white batiste

"This is blue silk for a dress for you. Make yourself smart, my little dove The grey blue will suit you And the batiste is for a blouse"

"For a blouse? Oh, Volodia, what a thing

you have thought of ! ” laughed Vasilissa. “ Such material for a blouse ? ”

“ Just that, seeing that it is white, ladies’ batiste—thin You must not always go about in your rough hair shirts as though you were an inflated bladder.”

“ No, but I will make for myself something better than a blouse . . . And the silk, beautiful though it is, you have got for me in vain. Goodness, was it for money down ? Why spend for nothing ? ” Vasilissa shook her head. Volodia’s gifts were not pleasing to her ; again they spoke of “ squandering.” Yet she was sorry to offend him.

“ Do you not like them ? ” Vladimir queried.

“ The material is lovely—there is no denying that ! . . . Only, what good is it to me ? Judge for yourself.”

“ But to the theatre ? ”

“ As though I am to go to the theatre with you as ‘ Madame Directress ’ ! ” . . . And Vasilissa smiled as she imagined herself in a blue gown of the sort.

“ Nevertheless, thank you . . . For your kindness, for your thoughtfulness.”

She raised herself on tiptoe, and embraced Volodia. She kissed him closely, closely.

“ Ah, Vasiuk ! So you have not yet unlearned the way to kiss ? And I had thought you quite to have fallen out of love with your husband . . . You have banished me from the bedroom . . . You never come to me, caress me . . .”

“ I never now have time for the two things . . .

And you yourself have not been in the mind for it ! ”

“ But you have not fallen out of love ? ”

“ I ? With you ? ”

“ Should you like me to remind you of how once we used to make love ? ”

Both of them laughed, as though they had been parted, and now had met one another again.

Vasilissa was about to hasten “ to the Mat-makers ” But at the very door of her house she remembered that she had not got with her Bukharin’s “ Manual ” It was in Volodia’s book cupboard She hurried to the cabinet She opened the glass door of the cupboard, and from a shelf there rolled down upon her a package It struck against the floor, and the paper came unrolled Vasilissa bent over it, and felt as though someone were compressing her heart with pincers exactly such a length of blue silk as Vladimir had given her, exactly such batiste save only that lace and open-work covered it in bands For what ? For whom ?

Surely not ? Vasilissa was afraid to think, afraid to look the truth in the eyes . . . But the serpent of jealousy had at once coiled itself about her heart, and was stirring its poisonous little tongue

“ He lives in two houses ” He had become

inconstant . . . At one moment "strange," not visiting her ; then, suddenly, caressing in the extreme, as though he had been guilty of something. She remembered how from Volodia, after the theatre, there had always come an odour of scent. She remembered how he had dandified himself before the mirror when he had been going out for the evening There came back to Vasilissa's recollection the long-forgotten "Sister" with the pouting lips The blood-stained woman's bandage . . .

In Vasilissa's eyes there was a darkness . . . Her hands had become, as it were, not her own, numbed all at once . . Her heart was gripped with unspeakable pain. Was Volodia, the beloved husband-comrade, deceiving her, his friend, Vasia ? He was carrying on with women ! Behind her back ? When she, Vasilissa, was there ? During a separation—that would have been another matter . . . One must not ask too much of a man ! . . But now When he was caressing Vasilissa, when Vasilissa was with him in whole—in heart, in love, in tenderness What could it mean ? Had he lost his affection for her ? That could not be ! . . Vasilissa's heart refused to believe in such a misfortune . . . She sought straws at which to catch. If he had lost his affection for her, would he have been so caressing, attentive to her ? Would he have called to her, Vasilissa, to come thither ? How could such a thing befall ? As that Volodia should fall out of love with Vasilissa ? For they were akin, grown together Friend-comrades !

How much they had lived through jointly ! And now another misfortune was boding . . . Vasia did not believe it, would not believe it . . . And the serpent of jealousy licked her heart with its poisonous tongue

Why was he so little at home ? Why was he so careworn, gloomy ? Why did he never "enjoy himself" on Vasia as he had been wont to do ? Why had he caught at the excuse that Vasilissa's cough annoyed him to spend his nights alone ?

Painfully the serpent of jealousy bit at her heart So painfully that she could have groaned But Vasilissa feared to listen to the serpent's agelong voice Thou liest, serpent ! . Vladimir loved her, Vasilissa ! He loved her ! Otherwise, would he have caressed her last night as he had done ? Perhaps these pieces of material had been meant for someone else , perhaps Volodia had to deliver them to someone ? Why had she jumped to the conclusion that this was *his* package at all ? It had no writing upon it ! She herself had invented the whole thing

Dimly the thought stirred "He lives in two houses "

And shame filled her for her distrust, for the fact that she was judging like "an old woman," "watching her husband " ! . . .

But the serpent none the less bit at her heart . . . Silence, base one ! When Vladimir came home she would ask him about it all. They would talk it out He would explain She would learn the truth

She possessed herself of the "Manual," and set off for the "Matmakers." She was late enough already.

Vasilissa hurried homeward ; she thought that she would be late for dinner. So long as she had been at the mat factory the serpent had lain dormant in her heart. But scarcely had she issued into the street, and found herself alone, when at once the base creature stirred . . .

"He lives in two houses" . . . Two equal lengths of silk, two pieces of batiste . . . Whence had Volodia come to know that white garments were made of such batiste ? . . . Who made them ? Depraved wenches, and various sorts of Nepmen with war money . . . And what was it he had said about Vasilissa's garments ? "Hair shirts," "an inflated balloon" . . . Was it dress that mattered ? . . . Once upon a time he would have loved her in such a blouse ! . . . Once upon a time he would not have left her on the first evening of her arrival . . . For a meeting, he had said. But why had he dandified himself before a mirror ? . . . Why had he smelt of scent ? . . . Why had he ceased to look at Vasilissa with subtly happy eyes ? When Vasilissa reached home she would at once ask him about it all. Now, tell the truth : for whom did you lay by the dress material ? Why did you hide it in the book cupboard ? If

it was somebody else's material, you should have put it on the table Do not dissemble ! Do not lie ! I should never forgive it !

Vasilissa ran up the steps to the verandah She rang the bell She was in a hurry The motor-car was in the forecourt already—which meant that Volodia too had reached home At once she must get to him, and to his reply She would never forgive "deception," never allow him to play with her as legal husbands played with unloved wives

Vasilissa fired herself, incited herself to wrath Why were they so long about opening the door ?

The latch gave a rattle At last !

"Guests to visit us, from Moscow," Maria Semenovna announced "Six men We shall have to feed them all Think of it !"

"Guests ? Who are they ?"

In the drawing room, voices They were talking eagerly And Vladimir was there, as host He presented his wife, Vasilissa Dementievna Members of a syndicate, the guests had brought with them a new plan of work

Vasilissa was for questioning the guests as to news of Moscow, as to the political process which now was preoccupying everybody But Maria Semenovna came and stood in the doorway, and covertly beckoned Vasilissa with a hand Manifestly some reinforcement with regard to the housekeeping was needed The pageboy Vasia was sent out for wine Ivan Ivanovitch departed for snacks And the grave Maria Semenovna

herself almost exhausted her energies : here one had to roast in the kitchen, there one had to lay the table. Vasilissa went to her help. Vladimir always required everything to be in order. That the table should look "like a barin's."

Both of them, Maria Semenovna and Vasilissa, toiled and moiled. It was well, too, when Ivan Ivanovitch returned, and added his assistance.

Vasilissa had no time to think further of the blue dress length. And the serpent in her heart concealed itself. It became quiet. As though it were not there. Vasilissa's wish now was to gratify her husband, so that the Director should not cut a bad figure before the Syndicalists.

Vasia arrived, panting, with the wine. Ivan Ivanovitch uncorked the bottles. The table looked as at Eastertide. Snacks, wine, flowers, Morozovian napkins, silver-handled knives . . .

They invited the guests to table. Vladimir eyed it nervously. He rested satisfied. But why did he not mutely thank Vasilissa with a look ? And she had striven so ! The serpent reawakened in her heart, stirred its venomous tongue . . . Painful this was. Insulting. Depressing.

Vasilissa conversed with the guests. But all the time she was thinking of the blue dress length . . . For whom had he meant it ? For whom ?

She glanced at Volodia. In a new way, as at a stranger. If he should lie to her, deceive her, he would in very fact become "a stranger" ! . . . Her own one, her kindred spirit, would have

pitied her. He would not have let the accursed serpent coil itself about her heart . .

All the evening was Vasilissa bustling about. She had to dispose the guests for the night. She sent out the pageboy Vasia for pillows, and arranged a "common lodging" in the cabinet whilst, as she did so, throwing glance after glance at the accursed book cupboard. In it there was lying the blue dress length. For whom was it meant? For whom? . . .

Vasilissa swept hither and thither. She entertained the guests with tea, but they talked all the while of their own affairs. They discussed species of goods. Methods of packing. A specification. Estimates.

A businesslike party. They themselves ex-merchants. Two Communists amongst them who also had put their hand to trade, and become real "Red dealers".

And Vladimir bloomed. He was proud of his business. He had outstripped all others. He had in hand an affair which not even a month would settle. In the merchants respect for him was manifest. They listened to his words. But to the other Managers they paid no attention.

Vasilissa took note of everything. At any other time she would have been delighted for Vladimir's sake. But to day, as things were, she seemed to him "a stranger". Business, and again business, and never a remembrance of *her*! Could he not see how her soul had been torn all day? How the serpent of jealousy had stabbed her heart continually? If he deceived her, lied

to her, Vasilissa, might he not in very truth be "not clean of hand"? Might the people at the Partkom not be right in bringing him to answer?

And what were these Syndicalists discussing? One would not learn in a whole day's length! Oh that they would leave her face to face with Vladimir! At least she would then learn about the blue dress length . . .

Vasilissa got herself ready for the night. She was expecting Vladimir. He was to spend the night with her; the Syndicalists had taken up all the other rooms. She kept listening for his footsteps. Already the guests had parted for the night. Only did he need yet to give Ivan Ivanovitch his orders for the morrow.

He was coming. Vasilissa's heart beat. Her knees shook. She sat down upon the bed. As soon as he entered she would put the question.

But Vladimir gave her no chance to put the question. He himself was too full of talk: He wanted Vasilissa's advice: as to how to reorganise the machine in such a way as to strengthen the Communists, as to place the Syndicalist-bourgeois under the heel of members of the Party.

"Do you advise me, Vasia. Think it out on your own account. To-morrow we are going to look at a new charter together. So do you first

of all read and consider it. The fat-bellied lot are making a bid for power, and carrying out a concealed attack upon us proletarians . . . Never mind ! We shall get them by the whiskers. The whole problem lies in organising the machine in such a way that without the Party, without the Communists—not a step ”

“ But how about it when you yourself do not execute the Party’s decrees ? More than once you have said : ‘ Exclusion from the Party would be no great misfortune. Even without the Party I shall be able to live ’ ! ”

“ Never mind what one says in rages,” smiled Vladimir. “ You yourself can understand that . . . How could I live without the Party ? Surely one must not sever oneself from it ? ” Vladimir became meditative as he took off his shoes “ Merely let this silly ‘ case ’ be taken off my mind. Then you and I, Vasia, would live a pleasant life. You will see what an exemplary Communist I shall become when they have transferred me to the new ‘ region ’ ! Straight amongst the Saints shall I be enrolled.”

Vladimir was satisfied to-night, and not gloomy as so frequently happened. And his eyes had in them a subtle little flame

“ Let us go to bed now.”

Vladimir was for extinguishing the lamp But Vasilissa stayed his hand.

“ No ; wait . . . I must . . . I wish first to ask you a question . . . ”

She raised herself upon her elbow, the better to see Vladimir’s face. Her heart was throbbing,

and her voice not as usual. Vladimir became wary.

"Ask about whatsoever the matter may be? Well?"

Yet he did not look at Vasilissa—he looked at the wall.

"I want to know . . . Why have you got those pieces of stuff lying in the book cupboard? The silk, the batiste . . ."

"The silk? Is it those samples that you are speaking of?"

"Samples there, indeed! A dress length, a large dress length, exactly like the one which you gave to myself . . . For whom are the things meant? For whom?" And she simply hung upon Vladimir's face.

"For whom, do you want to know? Surely you have guessed already?"

"I have not."

"Why, it is that Ivan Ivanovitch asked me to get them for his betrothed . . . He is continually plaguing me in that way. What I have, that he too must have! . . . In everything he apes me." Vladimir made the explanation quite simply, unhurriedly. The blood surged to Vasilissa's cheeks. She felt ashamed of herself.

"Ivan Ivanovitch? For his betrothed? . . . And I had thought . . ."

"What had you thought?" smiled Vladimir as he turned his face to Vasilissa again.

"My dear one, my darling! . . . My Volodika!"

Vasilissa kissed him. How dared she have

harboured thoughts against him? Not have believed him, her friend? Have suspected him?

'What, I say, had you thought? Ah, you, my little detective, what an inquisitor has appeared'

Volodia embraced Vasilissa, but in his eyes there was concern

'Well, but now—for sleep There is no time for more kissing of one another To morrow there will be no getting through the business with our guests I shall have to rise early'

And he extinguished the lamp

A weight seemed to have been removed from Vasilissa's heart Yet she had scarcely begun to go to sleep when the serpent bit at that heart again

Why did he call me his 'little detective'? 'Inquisitor'? Does that mean that there is something to detect?

Vladimir
But Vasiliss.
the darkness

To believe? Not to believe? To believe?
Not to believe?

The Syndicalists departed And for Vladimir there began a double task one of reorganisation Oh that cares could be lessened! Still, there was joy also Mikhailo Pavlovitch invited Vasilissa

to visit him in his "little cage." So-and-so—that from the Centre there had come a secret instruction that there were no direct "crimes" to be imputed to the Director, and that, as regards anything more in the matter of want of discipline and of "non-model" behaviour, the affair was, *without publicity and without stir, to be left in abeyance.* It was to be set aside.

Vasilissa heaved a sigh of relief. Very nearly did ancient usage lead her to say: "Thank God!" She checked herself in time. Mikhailo Pavlovitch too was glad, principally for Vasilissa's sake. He loved her, was sorry for her.

But Vasilissa met with failure in the "Arbitrational": they decided the matter in favour of the Management. The matmakers seethed. A strike became hinted at. The Mensheviks worked, strove under the mask of "non-Party" individuals. They fanned the attitude.

Although Vasilissa was coughing, and fever troubling her, she spent whole days at the mat factory. She disputed with the Management. She assailed it. She demanded concessions. She reasoned with the matmakers. She plunged completely into the task. She forgot to think of the blue dress length. There was no time for that. Only once did Vasilissa feel that the serpent was alive in her heart. She pulled herself together—*thou shalt not corrode!*

It all arose from a dog, from a white poodle.

The pageboy Vasias brought a white poodle to the house; on the poodle's head, between the ears, there was tied a silken bow.

"Whose? Whence? Why have you brought it?"

The pageboy Vasia said that Vladimir Ivanovitch had ordered that the poodle should live, for the time being, in the house. It belonged to Saveliev. After Saveliev's departure the residence had been empty, and the poodle had pined much.

Vasilissa was surprised. Whence had Vladimir acquired such pitifulness for dogs? Surely it was not to please Saveliev? And resentment against Saveliev stirred once more. Why was Vladimir continuing to maintain friendship with him? With a speculator—the rascal!

Vladimir came home. And the poodle twined itself around him as though it beheld its "master." Vladimir stroked the poodle, launched into a conversation with it.

"Whence the dog, Volodia? Saveliev's?"

"No such thing! It is the poodle of the betrothed of Ivan Ivanovitch, she has gone away. Ivan Ivanovitch has asked me temporarily to keep it at our place."

"But Vasia has said that it is Saveliev's."

"How he confuses! True, of recent days the dog *has* been in Saveliev's flat. Vasia fetched it from there, and so came to the conclusion that it was Saveliev's own."

Vasilissa listened, as though all were simple and clear. But the serpent indisputably writhed. With a tight coil it enveloped her heart. To believe? Not to believe?

Ivan Ivanovitch arrived. Vasilissa tackled him. Whose the poodle?

Ivan Ivanovitch circumstantially related as to his betrothed, as to how she had asked him to "treasure" the poodle. But where could he have done that? He had no house! He had dispatched the dog to Saveliev. There there had been servants only. They had frequently gone out—shut up the poodle . . .

Possibly it was so.

But Vasilissa did not love the poodle.

Vladimir Ivanovitch went away for a few days. On business of the Syndicate. Vasilissa remained alone. She imagined it would be wearisome. But the opposite resulted. She remained alone, and, as it were, grew lighter in soul. More untrammelled. There was not the heaviness which, in Vladimir's presence, pressed upon her heart like a stone. There was not the dudgeon, concealed, not expressed to Volodia, because he did not pay Vasilissa attention. It had been as though Vasilissa did not exist! . . . She had understood that he was busy, that his head was preoccupied with other things, but her heart, her obscure woman's heart, had grieved, craved caresses . . .

Without Vladimir things were better. Alone, thus alone. There was none of that waiting, listening, and fighting with one's sense of wrong.

Vasilissa invited her friends: Liza Sorokina, the "children" from the factory, Mikhailo

Pavlovitch She arranged suppers It was pleasant to Vasilissa to "entertain" friends in her place

After supper they would talk of Party affairs They walked in the garden They sang in chorus Everything was nice All were pleased And Vasilissa most so of anyone This was different from carrying on conversations with the Syndicalists or Saveliev "in the drawing room" !

Vasilissa did not notice how the days passed without her husband

Vladimir returned by an early train

He found Vasilissa at tea

Vasilissa leapt up to meet him, but he did not kiss her—he took her hand, and for long did not remove it from his lips . He raised his head—in his eyes there were tears Vasilissa's heart fell

"What is the matter with you, Volodia? Has anything happened again?"

"No Vasia, nothing has happened Only, it is difficult for me to live, Vasia . . . I am tired of everything"

He seated himself at the table, rested his head upon a hand, and let the tears drip from him

"But what is the matter with you, Volodia? What? Tell me, my friend It will relieve you"

"It will relieve me, Vasiuk?" Vladimir queried sorrowfully "I have thought much, have racked my brains . . . Much, Vasia, have I suffered No Things will not be better There is no escape"

And again Vasilissa's heart contracted with painful presentiment.

"Volodia, do not torture me. Tell, tell me only the truth I cannot go on like this . . . I am worn out ! . . . I get no rest . . ." As she spoke she could not catch the breath in her bosom. She coughed . . .

"So you see ! Again you have begun to cough. How can I discuss things with you ?" Volodia's voice sounded half reproachful, half melancholy.

Vasilissa kept on coughing, and Vladimir frowned. He lit a cigarette.

"At least drink some tea . . . Then perhaps it will pass," Vladimir advised .

"No ; I will take a lozenge."

The attack of coughing departed. Vasilissa gave Vladimir some tea. And he in his usual, businesslike tone told Vasilissa how difficult it was to carry on the business : the porters now were becoming clamorous. They were demanding overtime wages at the highest rate, and lowering the "norm" of labour . . . The Syndicate, because of them, was incurring losses, whilst they were using threats. If you do not pay, we—shall strike ! . . . Perhaps there are inciters at work. One cannot look after everything. "I had scarcely left the train when Ivan Ivanovitch presented me with the report. A treat indeed : that one need but go away for a few days, and up there sprouts a conflict. What were the other Managers doing with their eyes ? They ought never to have let things get to 'exacerbation.'

But now trouble is beginning . . . And that will supply fodder to the Gubkom "

"So that is why you said that it was difficult to live ? But why no escape ? Because of the porters ? "

"Of course Because of what else, did you think ? "

Vladimir puffed at his cigarette, slowly stirred his tea with the spoon And again he considered the conflict. How was he to arrange the matter so that there should be no scandal, no commotion ? Vasilissa listened with one ear To believe ? Not to believe ? Surely he would not have wept because of the porters ? That was not like Vladimir ! Something else had he on his soul . . .

"The blue dress length ? . . . " The serpent stirred in her heart Vasilissa would not give in to it Very likely Vladimir was tired They had harassed his soul not a little with the "case" in the K K Vasilissa acted as her own persuader She tried to think that Vladimir had no other cares than business cares That the Managers and the porters were responsible

Vasilissa hastened homeward from the mat factory She had insisted upon her point She had broken the Management They had gone to concessions. The matmakers were exulting

They had escorted Vasilissa to the gates. But Vasilissa knew : that, but for the Predgubkom, the matter would not have ended thus. Vasilissa often saw him now. She had learnt to appreciate him. A man of determination. And one who did not bestow blessings upon the Industrialists . . .

Vasilissa approached her house. She looked : the forecourt was crowded with porters. The din from their voices was continuous. They were disputing. Spokesmen amongst them were saying outright : According to the highest rate ! And none other ! Otherwise—right about turn, and down tools. Then let the Management, with its office staff, do its own portering.

Vasilissa inserted herself into the thick of the crowd. She listened. She asked questions.

They recognised Vasilissa. They hemmed her about. One tried to overshout another. All in a body they laid before her their discontent. They were not paid sufficiently . . . The reckoning was kept irregularly. They pressed upon Vasilissa, hurled threats at the Management. Besides, she was "the wife of the Director." Let her agitate, let her expound the matter to her husband . . . With such a rate of wages, family men had but the roof over them . . .

Vasilissa listened, put questions. The complaints were familiar to her, sympathetic, intelligible. A sense of wrong seethed in them. The Managers, the office staff, lived well, fatly, but from the porters they "simply stripped the hide." And their children lacked even clothing

... The matter could not be left thus. It was necessary to assail the Management. Through the union. Without organisation, without a plan, nothing would be attained. "Leaders" were picked out, and Vasilissa and they conferred. They decided to "formulate" their demands on paper. And then, if the Management would not yield, to proceed to the "Arbitrational" direct.

Vasilissa grew excited. She forgot her title of "wife of the Director." She took up completely the porters' affair. How could she not help "her own" with advice! They were an inexperienced lot, and had no real guides.

She invited the leaders into the house, that there they might do the formulation.

They entered. The porters walked through the reception rooms to Vasilissa's bedroom, and, as they did so, glanced covertly at the Directorial establishment. Only then did Vasilissa consider: that she ought not to have brought the porters within. But to retreat was too late.

They seated themselves at Vasilissa's little table. They "formulated"

Things became quieter in the forecourt. The men ceased to clamour. They waited. They split up into groups. They conversed. They smoked

And suddenly they raised a din again. A motor-car had driven up. The Director. And straight into the forecourt.

"What sort of proceedings are these? Are you thinking of holding a meeting? Have you

come with threats ? With complaints ? ” Vladimir’s voice rolled like thunder. “ I had not intended to converse with you here ! . . This is my private residence. Go to the Management. Are you dissatisfied with the wage rate ? Complain to the union ! . . . The Management is not concerned with that matter. It has other matters, cares. Do you wish to strike ? It is your own affair. If your union so decides—carry on with the strike. But you will clear out of this straight away ! . . I am not going to listen. We can talk at the Management’s offices.”

Vladimir slammed the front door. He entered the house. He went straight to the bedroom, to Vasilissa.

He walked in, and halted dead in the doorway. Vasilissa and the porters were sitting at the table, “ formulating ” . . .

“ So here, again, there is something new ? Who admitted you ? How dared you thrust yourselves upon me without asking ? Away ! Away out of this ! ”

“ But, Vladimir Ivanovitch, we did not come in here of ourselves It was your wife ”

“ Away, I say ! If not . . . ”

He had turned pale all over, his eyes were darting sparks, he was on the point of letting out with his fists. The porters—towards the doorway.

“ Are you mad, Vladimir ? How dare you ? . . I invited them in ! . . Stop, comrades ; whither are you going ? ”

Vasilissa rushed after the porters. Vladimir overtook her on the way, and grasped her so

painfully by the arm, above the elbow, that Vasilissa gave a loud moan.

"You invited them in? Who gave you leave to do so? Who called upon you to interfere in my affairs? You are not answerable for the Syndicate. . . If you want to spread a strike—go to the mat factory! . . ."

"Ah! . . . So! . . . You would bully me? For the truth? For going with my brother? For not considering your Directorial interests? For degrading the conciliation boards?"

"Ugh! repellent creature . . ."

It was as though he had lashed Vasilissa with a whip. Repellent? She, Vasilissa, repellent? . . .

The one stood facing the other. With furious eyes they exchanged looks. Like two enemies . . .

And to the heart there rose desolation, a desolation unspeakable, keen, deadly . . . Could this be the end of happiness?

The parties dispersed. Vladimir departed to the Management's offices. And Vasilissa lay across the bed with face thrust into the silken quilt. She flooded the silk with her tears . . . But there was no weeping away the sorrow with tears!

There was not only the sorrow that she should be repellent, but also the sorrow that they had become "strangers," unintelligible, to one another . . . Like two enemies As though in two camps

There ensued grey, joyless days. Vladimir was much at home. But what was the good of that? They were, as it were, strangers. They talked only of what was necessary. Each of them lived "self by self." Vasilissa ailed again. Ivan Ivanovitch drove for the doctor. The doctor prescribed: complete rest, the least possible agitation.

Vladimir was occupied in business with Ivan Ivanovitch, and with the Schetovod¹, and they would sit until nightfall in the cabinet. Then they would issue to supper absent-minded, dull, taciturn.

Liza Sorokina would come running to see Vasilissa. They would be talking of the "Mats." The mat hands were sorry that Vasilissa was unwell.

But it was not her illness that troubled Vasilissa; it was the fact that she and Volodia had become, as it were, "strangers." In no way could they forget the conflict with the porters. Both of them could not pardon something in soul.

Vasilissa considered returning to her own gubernia. She longed for "home." But where now was "home"? Grusha had settled in the garret under the roof. It would be too small for two. With one's parents one could not stay for long; they would begin to "bewail" their circumstances, to curse the Bolsheviks Whither, then? Vasilissa wrote to Grusha to find her a

¹Department of Accounts.

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room And to Stepan Alexeivitch to find her work, Party work, amongst the masses As soon as she received an answer she would go What was there for her to do here? She was not necessary any more Volodia was living without her The days were dragging along, melancholy, interminable

Summer was in full glow In the garden the cherries had ripened, the plums were beginning to cover themselves with blue The perennial lilies were showing tenderly white on their tall, slender stems But Vasilissa could not enjoy anything now As she walked in the garden she remembered how, in the spring, she had lain in the folding chair, and rejoiced in life, so that now she became sadder than ever

It seemed to Vasilissa that she had never existed at that time, but another Vasilissa, young, trustful, happy Something had departed What? Vasilissa could not define it, but knew that it had departed, and one could never recover it

Sometimes Vladimir would notice from a window how indifferent, languid Vasilissa was looking as, alone, she paced the garden He would knit his brows And in his eyes there would be trouble He would stand by the window And all at once he would turn away, and sit down again to business with Ivan Ivanovitch

And Vasilissa—would sigh Again she had been disappointed She had expected that he would come out to her in the garden

He had not come. Ah, well ! Evidently he had no time for Vasilissa ! . . . "Business" was of more importance than the pangs of a woman's heart ! . .

Vasilissa awoke with a start. Morning. Vladimir was busy at his chest of drawers, getting something out of it.

"What are you doing so early, Volodia ?"

"Railway station. To receive a consignment."

"Yourself ?"

"I have to see to the checking."

Vladimir proceeded to tie a new tie before a mirror, and it would not fit. Vasilissa watched him, and suddenly he seemed to her so near and dear, so desirable.

"Let me help you. Come here, Volodia."

He came obediently. He sat down upon the bed. Vasilissa tied his tie. The one looked at the other, and all at once, silently, they embraced.

"My Vasiuk, little one ! My own, my own . . . It is so painful, so painful to live as strangers. Surely it is not always going to be like that ?" Vladimir asked this last quite pitifully as he pressed Vasilissa's curly head to himself.

"And do you think it does not hurt me also ? . . One might as well not be alive."

"Then why are we quarrelling, Vasia ?"

"I do not know. Something has arisen between us."

"No, Vasia! No! Nothing can arise between us, in heart, Vasia, I am yours, only yours"

"You have not lost your affection?"

"Little fool! . . ." He kissed Vasilissa

"Let us quarrel no longer. It is stupid. It hurts both of us. I must not lose you, Vasia. Without you I could not live. So, suppose we 'scratch one another' no more?"

"Well, will you Directorise no more?"

"And will you incite the porters against me no more?"

They laughed

"Now, go to sleep! If you do not have your sleep out you will be poorly again all day. I shall be back in two hours"

He tucked Vasilissa up, kissed Vasilissa's eyes, and departed. And things had become so well at heart with Vasilissa. Light, light . . . And Vasilissa slept blissfully, as though joy had returned, as though that, the chief, thing had not wholly disappeared . . .

Vladimir did not return after the unloading; he rang through on the telephone that he had next to go to the Management's offices. He would be back for dinner. Vasilissa felt better to-day. But she did not go to the mat factory. She occupied herself with the "house-keeping"—she and Maria Semenovna tidied up the dwelling.

Not long before dinner there came another ring on the telephone. Vasilissa approached it.

"Hullo!"

"Is Vladimir Ivanovitch at home?"

"Not yet. Who is speaking?"

"It is from the Management's offices."

"Then why do you enquire at the house when he must still be there, with you?"

"He is so no longer; he has left. Excuse us."

Again that woman's voice! Who could she be? Vasilissa did not like the voice. It had frequently called up Volodia during the first few days after her arrival. Then all at once it had ceased. Once Vasilissa had asked Ivan Ivanovitch who it was that kept continually calling up Vladimir Ivanovitch from the Management's offices, and, at that, during working hours. Ivan Ivanovitch had explained that it was one of the clerks. Strange! Why were the voices so alike? And again Vasilissa had become uneasy. The accursed serpent had stirred in her heart . . . It had made it hurt! . . .

Vladimir came home to dinner with two of the other Managers. They were much occupied with the morning's consignments. Nevertheless he did ask Vasilissa how she was feeling. Had she warmed herself in the sunshine as the doctor had bidden?

"No, I have not warmed myself," Vasilissa retorted drily. And then, as though by chance, she added: "Again the lady who used constantly to ring you up from the Management's offices has been asking for you on the telephone."

"What lady?" Vladimir said with eyes expressive of astonishment. "From the Management's offices, do you say? Then probably it was Shelgunova? A 'lady,' indeed! A

respected dame with a family . . . You should see her, Vasia ; ever so stout, with a bit of beard . . . ”

This was said simply, naturally, but Vasilissa still worried.

No ; something or another was altogether otherwise . . .

After dinner the two Managers took their leave. Vasilissa was glad ; she wanted to spend the evening with Volodia, and warm herself in soul . . . That not in vain might the morning have boded joy.

But the Managers had only just been seen off when the telephone bell tinkled in the cabinet. Vladimir went to the telephone.

“ Yes, I,”—abruptly. “ I had asked you not to telephone,”—reproachfully. “ Well, of course, if family circumstances should allow.” With a laugh. “ Not on any account . . . Categorically I forbid it. Absolutely. Oh, all right, all right,”—less firmly. “ Only, for no more than a very short time. Au revoir.”

Vasilissa stood in the next room, and listened. And again something gnawed sorely at her heart . . .

With whom was he speaking ? To whom was he promising “ a very short time ” ? Whom could he “ forbid ” ? . .

Vladimir came straight from the cabinet to the bedroom. Past Vasilissa. As though he did not notice her. Vasilissa followed him. Vladimir was touching himself up before the mirror—combing his hair with a comb.

"With whom were you speaking, Volodia, over the telephone?"

"With Saveliev."

"With Saveliev? Has he, then, returned?"

"This morning."

"Did you meet him?"

"Why such a questioning, pray tell me? You know quite well that I was receiving consignments." Uneasily, vexedly.

"And now you are for going to him again? You have promised him so to do?"

"Yes, I am going to him."

A silence.

Vasilissa could feel her heart beating ever more violently, more violently . . . Presently it would burst. Let it! The suffering exceeded her strength. And suddenly she walked up to Vladimir, and took him fondly by the hand.

"Volodia! Do not do this . . . Do not begin again from the beginning . . ."

"How from the beginning?"—suspiciously and nervously.

"Carrying on with this vagabond-speculator. . . They have advised me that the principal charge against you is that you cultivate acquaintanceships with 'unsuitable persons' . . ."

"Ah! . . . And you again from the beginning? You have always sung the same tune as your dispensers! . . . Do you want to wear me out? To deprive me of freedom? . . . To have me sown to your petticoat? . . ." He boiled up, and threw off Vasilissa's hand from his.

"Stay! Stay, Vladimir. Of what are you

speaking? *When* have I tried to pin you to my petticoat? Recollect yourself? The person concerned is not I—it is you. Do not dig a pit for yourself. You have enemies enough. And as soon as you begin to cultivate friendship with Saveliev.”

“What has Saveliev to do with it?”

“What has he to do with it? Are not you going to him?” Vasilissa’s eyes questioned anxiously.

“Of course, to him. But what of that? I am going on business. Do you understand? That is indispensable.”

“I do not believe it! .”—furiously
“Put him off until to-morrow, ask him to meet you at the offices.”

“Vasia! Now, what a child you are,”—with change of tone. “Very well, then, I will tell you the truth. Of course, Saveliev is *not* sending for me on business. We should have settled any business at the offices. Merely, he has got assembled at his place a small, cheerful company.

And he is inviting me to go and play cards. You yourself, Vasia, have seen that almost for a month past I have been nowhere—that always it has been home and home, always business. Let me have at least an occasional rest! Vasia! I too am young, I wish to live. I cannot be a *skhimnik*!”

“I understand, Volodia,” sadly lowering her head. “All that is so. And in your amusing

¹ A priest of the severest order, distinguished by wearing a vestment known as the *skhima*.

yourself there is no harm . . . But only, you understand, you shall not again begin with Saveliev, a speculator, a villain ! You yourself do not respect him . . . What good is he to you ? Presently it will be mooted : Vladimir Ivanovitch again is consorting with Saveliev. And the tale will spread . . . Volodia ! Dear one ! I beseech you, do not go to him to-night ! . . . Ring him up ; decline . . . ”

“ What sillinesses ! ”—impatiently. “ If the Gubkom has time to create judicial cases out of every acquaintanceship, it is not a Gubkom, but a dustbin . . . You, Vasia, are exaggerating . . . ”

“ But what if it is displeasing to me, Volodia, that you should go to him ? He does not like me, I know . . . He purposely invites you, to spite me . . . I heard you explain to him, over the telephone, that you could go to him ‘ only if family circumstances allow ’ . . . And both of you laughed . . . Volodia,”—growing agitated—“ it hurts me, offends me, that you should laugh at me with him, with a stranger, and with whom ? With Saveliev. As though I would not release you . . . ”

“ Well, that is just how it is ! . . . ”

“ Ah ! That is how you, on your side, put the question ! Very well, then ! Go to him ! Go . . . But remember ”—she flashed her eyes angrily—“ remember that there can be an end to my patience . . . I have extricated you, borne with you, stood up for you . . . Enough . . . If you wish—go . . . But I know what at the

same time *I* mean to do!" Her voice was hysterical, harsh

"These feminine hysterics weary me!"—angrily "Why have you got excited? What is it you want of me?"

Volodia!"—with tears in her voice "Never have I asked you for anything! To-day, now, I do ask you for something Stay at home For your own sake For mine!"

Oh, you women! All on the same string! You have tired me out! Past Vasilissa, hurriedly, into the hall The front door slammed The motor-car hummed

"Ah!" Vasilissa groaned like a wounded animal! 'A ah! A ah!'

'Liza, I have come to you Shelter me I have left him Altogether"

Her voice broke off But her eyes were dry The grief was too great,—of tears there were none

'You have left him? It had long been time!

All of us have been surprised at your continuing to put up with him'

He and I, Liza, had become estranged That is wherein the trouble lay," wailed Vasilissa

It would be a wonder if you were *not* 'estranged' What in the world makes you love him?"

Vasilissa did not reply. She herself could not yet believe in what had happened. But such an "affront" she could not pardon, could not forget. The first time she *had* pardoned . . . And he? He had as good as stridden over her corpse. And for what? For what? In order to play cards with a worthless speculator of a Saveliev and an, in all probability, equally worthless speculating circle! . . . Vasilissa might die of grief, and it would be all one to him so long as he enjoyed himself, amused himself, whenever he bethought him of doing so . . . And did that mean love? And was he a friend-comrade? And was he a "Communist"? . . .

Liza listened to Vasilissa's disconnected talk. And all the time she remained at a loss: what exactly had occurred between them? And what had Saveliev had to do with it?

"What had he had to do with it? Why, it all came of him, of that rascally speculator. Vladimir went to see him

"You think, to see *him*?"

"Then to see whom else? Do you suppose that Vladimir did not?"

"Suppose, indeed! . . . All the town knows about it; only you have been as though blind . . . Or else purposely you would not see . . . You would not understand! . . ."

"What is there to see? Liza! But tell me!"

"Why, that Vladimir of yours has got a young lady."

"A young lady?"

Vasilissa did not at once understand. She

stared at Liza with eyes grown large. In them there was neither dismay nor grief, but just—astonishment.

"A young lady, you say? Who is she, then?"

"Not one of us, not a working-woman . . . One of the offices staff."

"Do you know her?"

"I have seen her. All the town knows her."

"For what reason?"

"Because she flaunts in fine dresses. It is because of this that the comrades are the most offended with your Vladimir. Mikhailo Pavlovitch too has told you about these acquaintanceships. How you come not to have been aware of them—I! Well, you are no fool, but in this matter you have shown yourself worse than the very worst of fools."

But something else was concerning Vasilissa.

"Does he love her?"

"How can one tell? He must do, if he has been carrying on the scandal for so many months. What a fellow he is! . . . He keeps driving to see her in her flat in his motor car."

"She has a flat of her own?"

"One which will be smarter than yours."

So that was what "He lives in two houses" had meant!

Now all was clear to Vasilissa. Only one thing still was vague—and that was why Vladimir had lied to Vasilissa? Why he had tortured her? Why had he deceived her?

"Then would you have had him come to your

place with his abandoned woman? Or have asked leave of you : may I go and see my young lady? . . . It was your business to keep an eye open . . . You did not keep an eye open sufficiently, and were made a fool of—you have only yourself to thank for it.”

“As though you need keep reminding me that I have been a fool, Liza! . . . That is not the important point . . . The important point is something else . . . Does he love her, or is it simply otherwise?”

“Well, what is ‘simply otherwise’? I do not understand what you are talking about! . . . Probably he loves her if he is ready to keep her in everything, and gives her still more expensive presents . . .”

“You think so? . . . But I, for my part, do not know . . .”

“You think, in fact, that it is yourself that he loves? Do not you deceive yourself, Vasilissa, or you will be hurt worse still! He, of course, values you. You are his wife and a good comrade. But he does not love you, and has not done so for long past. Believe me . . .”

Vasilissa shook her head.

“But I, you see, do not believe you!”

Liza was angry with Vasilissa’s “silliness.” Purposely she told her more about Volodia’s “young lady.” A beauty—painted. And how she dressed herself! . . . All in silk. And always cavaliers revolving around her. Rakes. And Saveliev, in attendance upon her, was friendly with them. In the evenings they

"revelled" People declared that Vladimir went halves with Saveliev in the girl's keep . . .

For some reason this pained Vasilissa especially.

Surely Vladimir had not become "such as that"? . . . Surely he could not love a "wanton"? Vasilissa did not believe it; what one wants not to believe one does not believe. Something here was otherwise . . .

But Liza grew the more angry . . .

"Then *don't* believe it . . . It is your own affair. Ask anyone you like All will tell you the same thing . . . She was an offices lady. A secretary under Saveliev. And then she passed into the Director's employ . . . And perhaps others as well use her. And Rumour runs about Ivan Ivanovitch. Some of the Managers visit at her place . . . She is as good as a street girl, except that she lacks a 'ticket' . . . Goodness is not in demand in Soviet Russia . . ."

"But Vladimir could never have fallen in love with such a woman," Vasilissa protested.

"Why should you think so? Men fall in love with such women precisely. Particularly such a man as your Vladimir. He has now made it clear that, the more depraved a woman, the dearer to him she is."

"Be quiet, Liza! Do not you dare! You do not know him at all How can you judge of him?"

"Why do *you* stand up for him? He has degraded you, one may say, before the whole town, you, heigh-ho! are woe-begone on his account."

"Degraded ! . . . It is your own imagination that he has degraded me ! . . . What have I to do with the way in which Vladimir behaves ! . . . Am I responsible for him ? You do not understand me, Liza. It is not that that is hurting me . . . It is something else altogether . . ."

"The fact that he has fallen out of love with you is what is hurting you."

"No, Liza ; again I say that it is something else . . . That, of course, is a wrong as well. Only, it is not the chief one . . . I feel what I feel, but I cannot express it . . . How could I ? He and I were comrades, kindred souls, intimates, and all at once Vladimir hid himself from me, lied to me . . . He was afraid of me . . . Of me ? Oh, how could he have been so ? Should I have stood in his way ? Should I have hindered his lovemaking ? . . . Volodia cannot, cannot have thought that ! . . . And it follows that here there is something otherwise . . . It follows that he does not love that woman so very much . . ."

"Well, she has caused scandal enough,"—and Liza made a gesture of irritation. "One cannot talk sense to you . . . You are too painfully smitten with your Volodika . . . Beat me, tread upon me—I still will be your humble wife ! I still will lick your boots . . . I myself am not like that ! I would have given him such a paying out for such conduct as, oho !—well, just you wait."

Vasilissa did not argue the point. The more that Liza condemned Vladimir, the more stoutly

did Vasilissa stand up for him. She tried to show Liza - that his fault lay not in his having set up a sudarushka¹, in his loving another. But in the fact that he had not told her, Vasilissa, of this . . . It had been as though she had not been a friend, a comrade. As though she had been a stranger . . . It followed, did it not, that she had not only been in very fact a stranger, but one in whom he had placed no trust? In her, in Vasilissa? . . . Did Liza think that she would be like a legal wife, and stand up for her rights?

"Yes, stand up for them!" cried Liza. "You are bound to stand up for them . . . How dared he befoul you? . . . And then you ought to leave him for good . . . He is not worthy of you, Vasia, not worth your little finger."

Vasilissa disputed this. It is always so: Vasilissa herself frequently condemned Vladimir in her soul, and did not approve of acts of his; but just let anyone else assail Vladimir, and Vasilissa rushed across to his side, and boiled all over with offendedness on his behalf . . . People did not understand him . . . Vasilissa alone knew Vladimir, "the American," throughout . . . She uttered the word "American," and only then, for the first time, gave way to tears . . . Vladimir came back to her mind—as "the American" at the time when he had run co-operatives, when he had stood out for Soviets . . . Grief seized upon her . . .

She embraced Liza, wept. She was thinking

¹Young lady

not of Vladimir the Director, but of "the American"; her longing was for him—deadly, inescapable.

"I am distressed, Lizanika . . . I cannot help it."

"I know, my pet; I know, my precious one . . . Be patient, Vasilissa. It will pass. With me too, during the past year, the same thing happened. But now I can face myself again, come what may . . . It will pass, my little friend. Everything passes."

Liza soothed Vasilissa, comforted her. But is it possible, in such grief, to comfort?

Vasilissa could not sleep. Liza had lodged her in her, Liza's, own bed. Liza herself was perched on chairs. Liza had been hurrying about all day. Now she was slumbering soundly. But Vasilissa kept tossing from side to side—now sitting up, now lying down again. There was no rest for her. Her thoughts so ran on, so jostled one another. They kept torturing her, rending her heart in pieces. As then, on that dreadful night, when she had found the blood-stained bandage, and they had arrested Vladimir . . .

Not jealousy was torturing her. The serpent had taken cover, was not stirring, was, rather, lying in wait. Volodia's distrustfulness was what was torturing her. If it had not been that—she

could have pardoned everything ! A man had not freewill over his heart But still Vasilissa did not believe that he loved that, the other, woman ! She did not believe it ! Merely a "tie" of a sort had become accomplished He had lived alone for months Vladimir was hot blooded She remembered Stesha He had bound himself And so it had gone on And the woman would not let him go Liza herself had said that the woman 'drew' upon him But if she drew upon him she did not love him It meant that she was merely taking advantage of him And women of the sort were cunning and dexterous And they did not release from their toils such an one as Volodia He might wish to break free, yet could not Vasilissa remembered now that Vladimir had constantly gone about looking careworn, she remembered how inequable he had been now caressing, now suddenly distant He had been in pain He himself had been suffering Assuredly ! Torture indeed ! One might live with a man near and dear to one, and all the time some villain be hacking at his legs behind one's back It came back to Vasilissa's memory how that more than once Vladimir had seemed to be wishing to confess something, and then suddenly had broken off There had been the morning when the conflict with the porters had taken place, he had quite begun then It had been on his tongue, Vasilissa had felt She herself had been frightened of something And then, as though of ill luck, she had started coughing Vladimir had fallen

silent. It meant that he had "been sorry" about something? And if he had been sorry it meant that he loved her. Loved her? Yes, it could not be denied, loved her! . . . But the blue dress length? . . . Identical for both . . . Now, repellent wife, I am buying a present for her, for my beloved beauty, but I will not forget you also, repellent one . . . Take the silk, and hold your tongue! . . . Ugh, the horrible man! . . . Vasilissa clenched her fists as though she were getting ready actually to join battle with Vladimir. And the serpent became overjoyed. It coiled itself around her heart—gnawed . . . It nipped with its little tongue . . . No rest for Vasilissa! . . . Vasilissa was in pain. Despondency was stifling her. The serpent had enveloped her heart. She reflected that: of course it was not to Saveliev that he had gone last night? And Saveliev had had nothing to do with it! So it had merely been an excuse. To serve as a blind, to serve as "cover" . . . Vasilissa would never forgive it if indeed it was because of Saveliev, because of the "cheerful" company, because of the idiotic cards, that he had stridden across Vasilissa's soul last night . . . Forgive, or not forgive—I mean to do as I like! . . . Though you die of grief, I am going to get my own! . . . For you, repellent one, I will sacrifice not a jot! . . . That, that was what had hurt most! That had been the cause of Vasilissa leaving her husband. If she had known that he had a sudarushka, that "love was whirling him about," she would have felt no enmity against Vladimir. She might have wept, sorrowed, but she

would have understood. As it was, behold, he had, because of Saveliev, of a base speculator, offended Vasilissa. She would have understood the "young lady." And have pardoned her? As then with the Sister, and with Stesha? . . . And would she have liked the white poodle? And would she have forgotten about the blue dress length? No, such times were not now. *Then* there had been but the one thing; *then* soul had lived in soul. *Then*, as comrades, they had gone to battle hand in hand, together . . . now—each of them self by self . . . What had kept them together? The heart. And if Vladimir had taken away his heart? What remained? How was one to pardon that? How to forget it? . . . There one could not forget . . . There one could not reconcile oneself to . . . The grief, what grief it was . . .

And it seemed to Vasilissa that not a human being in the world was more unhappy than Vasilissa . . .

Liza had just gone out to work in the morning when the door opened—Maria Semenovna made her appearance. She had covered her head with a black lace scarf. She was out of breath. Heat. Summer at its height.

"Good day, Vasilissa Dementievna. I have brought you a letter from your husband. He bade me take a cab for speed. But where will you find them now? I am quite exhausted."

Vasilissa tore open the Managerial envelope and sheet of paper, whilst her fingers grew cold. They would not obey her.

“Vasia ! what, then, is this ? What are you doing with me ? Why are you harassing me so harshly ? Or is it that you want to make a scandal over the whole ‘region,’ and so afford food to my enemies ? And so ruin me completely ? . . You have said that you are my friend, but in point of fact you march with my foes. You have placed all my soul in torment ! . . I cannot live longer thus ! . . If you have lost love for me—say so straight out. Why strike at me from behind a corner ? You know that I love you alone. All else, all that people have craftily told you against me, is fiddlesticks, transient . . . Hear me out ! I swear to you that I was not at Saveliev’s last night ! I swear that in the place where I was—I did not prove false to you ! . . . My heart always is with you . . . I am worried to death. Vasia ! Pity me. Come to me, that I may look into your dear eyes, and tell you all. The whole truth ! . . If you are a comrade and a friend to me—come you will . . . If not—farewell ! But know that without you—I will not live. Your unhappy Volodia.”

Vasilissa read the letter once, twice. And then her heart overflowed with sweet joyousness, tears welled to her eyes. “Transient.” “I love you alone.” Next, resentment against Vladimir once more seethed up: she, forsooth, was harassing him ! She, forsooth, was to pity him ! Whereas he—had he pitied ? Had not he harassed ? Vasilissa’s tears dried themselves, and her pale lips pressed themselves harshly together. “Unhappy” ! One *would* suppose,

unhappy ! All night he had been exchanging endearments with another woman He had taken her the blue silk He had not pitied Vasilissa How she had begged of him last night—stay here ! She had put all her soul into her eyes ! He had thrown off Vasilissa's hand, shouted at her "as at a man" and departed ! He wrote "I love you alone" ! He lied ! He did not love her ! Fine love indeed Merely wrongs, merely sorrows What good to Vasilissa was such love ? And why, forsooth, did he write "Farewell Know that without you I will not live" ! Surely he was not meditating something ? Rubbish ! He was threatening So that Vasilissa should relent, so that, like a fool, she should run to his call

And again, for the third time, Vasilissa read Volodia's letter

Maria Semenovna sat grave, seemingly in different, wiped the perspiration from her face, fanned herself with the kerchief

"You had only just gone last night when Vladimir Ivanovitch arrived He asked where you were I said how should I know ? He went into the cabinet He sat down to his papers Then he sent for Ivan Ivanovitch by telephone They sat together After midnight he came into the kitchen, and asked had you returned ? I said—no Again he went away He saw off Ivan Ivanovitch, and passed into the bedroom There, probably, he read your note I heard him weeping Exhausting himself like a little boy So he did not lie down all night He walked,

walked, walked . . . And this morning he never drank any tea ; ' never mind ' he said, ' I do not want it.' Go out and find me Vasilissa Dementievna. Go round all her friends until you do find her. Without her you are not to show yourself at home again."

Vasilissa listened, and her heart pinched her. Her habitual tenderness for Vladimir filled her soul, flooded her heart with pain. He had been alone that night. He had waited up for her . . . He had worried, wept . . . He had called for her, Vasilissa. And she there, how she had tormented herself ! She there, how she had strained towards him ! She had been torn with jealousy . . . Manifestly, not yet sundered were the threads which knit together their hearts ; manifestly, not yet gone was love ! Why prolong the agony ? . . Return ? Go to him if only to have an explanation ? . .

" When you left home, what was Vladimir Ivanovitch doing ? Was he getting ready to go to the Management's offices ? "

" When I left home ? Oh, he had just rung up his sudarushka on the telephone . . . Probably he had a mind to share his grief . . . Or, maybe, his joy . . . Who can make out those men ? They only want not to have a scandal . . . "

He had rung up the sudarushka ? That morning ? Just now ? He had sent Vasilissa a letter, but rung up the sudarushka ? . . Perhaps Liza was right : he held on to Vasilissa only so that no scandal should result ? If she had not been his recognised wife he would not have given her a glance ! . . And he was summoning her only

so that once more he could lord it over her . . . No ! Enough ! Be silent, foolish heart ! Vasilissa was not going to him She was not going to fall into the snare .

Yet in her eyes, from grief, there was a darkness

"Tell Vladimir Ivanovitch that there will be no answer to him. That is all . . . And go as quickly as possible . . . Go then ! Now, go ! . .

"Well, one can't go quicker than quickly ! And to hurry in such matters isn't the thing, either . . . You, Vasilissa Dementievna, should have thought a bit first . . . Although, of course, Vladimir Ivanovitch has been guilty towards you, as towards his spouse, you too haven't been right . . . Who would leave a young husband for months together alone ? And, if you come to think of it, Vladimir Ivanovitch is a good husband in everything . . . How he concerns himself about you ! Do you drink your cocoa ? Have I bought fresh eggs for you ? . . . He thinks more of your things than of his own , I am to refuse you nothing . . . And as regards the women

Well, which of them, of those men, is not sinful ? You are his wife , he respects you. But elsewhere what ? He has paid money, made gifts, and that is the whole story ! . . ."

Vasilissa listened to Maria Semenovna, and felt harder than ever in soul . . . If it had been possible for her, Vasilissa, too to think like that, all would have been simple ! . . . Maria Semenovna did not understand that the fault did not lie in that . . . Vladimir was no longer her

friend. And she had no belief in him . . . And, with no belief, how could they live together ? . . .

"Will you not wait until evening, Vasilissa Dementievna ? Shall I go home and tell your husband that you are 'thinking it over,' and will send him an answer this evening ? That would be the wiser plan. Otherwise, f-r-r ! she has decided ! She has marked me off ! . . One can make a mistake in heat. Take care that you aren't sorry later, don't bewail yourself."

"No, Maria Semenovna ; do not dissuade me. As I have said, so it shall be. I will not return to him . . . It is ended."

But her lips were trembling, and tears, large, bitter, trickling over her sunken cheeks.

"Well, it is your own affair ! . . There is my advice, but it is for you to decide."

Maria Semenovna departed, and Vasilissa again, like a wounded animal, could have groaned—loudly, at length, so that it could have been heard all over the house, all down the street. The end was come. One could not return ! Farewell, Volodia ! . . . Farewell, beloved ! farewell, desired one !

Vasilissa's thin hands stretched themselves out towards Volodia, her sickened heart reached in his direction . . . Tears flowed over her pale cheeks.

But the torturer, reason, said : "Enough. Go not. End it. It is time."

Vasilissa wept, wept as she thrust herself into Liza's pillows, and fell asleep. All night, actually, had she not closed her eyes !

She was awakened by a humming. Under the window a motor-car was clattering.

Whose ? Had Vladimir himself suddenly come for her ? Hope, joy troubled in her heart.

She rushed to the shutters. She hurried to open them.

Already the pageboy Vasia was standing in the doorway.

"A misfortune at our place, Vasilissa Dementievna. Vladimir Ivanovitch has poisoned himself."

"What ? What ?" Vasilissa darted across to Vasia, and seized his hand. "Is he dead ?"

"Not yet, he is alive. Only, he is twisting himself about very much, and suffering great pain. He keeps calling for you. So here has Ivan Ivanovitch sent me to fetch you. In the motor-car."

Inasmuch as Vasilissa always walked bare-headed, she at once entered the car. Tooth would not meet tooth, she was shaking as in a fever.

She had killed her beloved ! She had tortured him. She had had no pity, she had not gone to his help. He had called to her to do so that morning, how, too, he had called !

Vasilissa's eyes had become large, set. Not

grief was in them, but, as it were, a sense of powerlessness to escape. Death.

The pageboy Vasia did not see her eyes. Briskly he related how the affair had happened. He was pleased that such a novel, unlooked-for occurrence had befallen !

That morning Vladimir Ivanovitch had gone to the Management's offices, stayed there for half an hour, and returned home. He had entered his cabinet. Vasia had seen him go to a cupboard where phials were kept for proving colours "for fixity."

Vasia, meanwhile, had been sweeping the forecourt. Then he had entered the hall and heard : someone, seemingly, groaning. He had gone into the cabinet to see who had got in there . . . *And Vladimir Ivanovitch had been lying on a divan as though a corpse.* He had rolled up his eyes, opened his lips, and found foam in the mouth . . . Surely a fit had come upon him ! . . .

Vasia had run for the doctor who lived round the corner. The doctor, at the moment, had just been sitting down to luncheon. But Vasia had said : so-and-so, a man is dying, and you can eat your meal later. Twice, too, had they dispatched Vasia to the chemist, in the motor-car. Ivan Ivanovitch also had come running in. The house had been turned topsy-turvy . . .

Vasilissa listened to Vasia, yet seemed not to hear him. Vasia had ceased to be. There existed only—Vladimir and his suffering. Vasilissa was distraught by them. Should Vladimir not recover, life was over for Vasilissa. There

would remain but a void A void that would be stranger than the tomb

Vasilissa and the pageboy entered the hall, and Ivan Ivanovitch happened just then to be seeing the doctor off

‘ Alive ? ”

“ We are doing everything that is possible Until morning one cannot say anything for certain ”

Vasilissa advanced on tiptoe into the bedroom She was met with groans from Volodia which kept growing ever more and more distinct And it seemed to Vasilissa as though it were she herself that was groaning Indeed, could Vladimir exist separately from her, from Vasilissa ?

In the bedroom there was disorder to an unwonted degree Carpet rolled up, bed shifted in position But the bed was empty Where, then, was Volodia ? Something large, white, long was on a divan The face greyish-blue The eyes closed The groans suddenly ceased

What was this ? Was he dead ?

“ Volodia ! Volodia ! ”

The doctor turned upon her angrily

“ Hush I beg of you, no hysterics ”

The doctor then busied himself over Vladimir, and there helped him a Sister in a white scarf The faces of both were grave, severe Neither of them would let Vasilissa approach Vladimir

He opened his eyes, drew several rapid breaths
Alive

Doctor,’ Vasilissa implored in a whisper, ‘ tell me the truth is there hope ?

"There is always hope so long as the heart works," the doctor jerked out in a dissatisfied tone, as though Vasilissa were asking him foolish questions.

What did that mean : so long as the heart works ? Suppose it should work no longer ?

But she did not dare to ask more. The doctor was busy ; he and the Sister were raising Volodia's head, and pouring something into his mouth.

And Volodia now was groaning again. With broken, sobbing groans : "Oo-oo ! Oo-oo ! Oo-oo ! . . ." Vasilissa listened. She felt as though she could suffer no more. She sat petrified all over. She seemed to have lost her senses with pain. It was as though Vasilissa were not.

Evening came on. It grew dark. They lit the night lamp in the bedroom. Other doctors arrived. They conferred. They sent the page-boy Vasia for a permit for special treatment, to the Zdravootdiel.¹

Still they would not let Vasilissa approach Vladimir. And he was calling for her no more. Now he seemed to have sunk into unconsciousness, now he groaned intermittently, heavily . . . With each groan his spirit might have been about

¹ Health Department.

to leave the body It was as though Vladimir's spirit were warring with the body, and the body refusing to release the spirit.

Vasilissa now felt superfluous, helpless. She was jostled about amongst the doctors, and did not know to what to betake herself.

And suddenly it flashed up in her mind that probably rumours were creeping about the town already. People would be saying a Communist, and made an attempt at suicide! Why? And a tale would run!

As quickly, as quickly as possible should the tale tellings be cut short. As quickly as possible should there be invented the necessary excuse for the why and the what of the happening? And at once her wit suggested he was poisoned with mushrooms! He ate some for luncheon, and see—he is at death's door! Vasilissa remembered how once, when she was staying with her grandmother, just such a case had happened in the village—a tailor had come from the town to see a brother, and picked some mushrooms, and cooked and eaten them, and died. Vasilissa rang up on the telephone. First of all, Mikhailo Pavlovitch, to whom she intimated that, pending more information 'when I see you,' she would impart to him a calamity—namely, that Vladimir Ivanovitch had been poisoned with mushrooms. He was lying at death's door. Next, the Predgubkom. Then other comrades.

She posted also Ivan Ivanovitch. And he explained things to the Managers, and let the offices staff have the news. Likewise, Vasilissa

spent a long time in inculcating into the page-boy and Maria Semenovna what they were to say.

The pageboy, brisk, knowing, sniffed, shrugged his shoulders, and, for his part—was satisfied. *Such* an affair had happened! What business was it of his? If with mushrooms, then with mushrooms! It was all one.

But Maria Semenovna crossed her hands upon her stomach, and compressed her lips offendedly. By no means would she agree to the mushrooms.

“How could one get such poison from mushrooms? Everyone will say: what was the cook thinking of?”

Vasilissa, nevertheless, insisted: to everyone already it had been said: that he had eaten some mushrooms, and fallen sick of them.

“As you will. Only, they have invented something altogether beyond reason . . . Something else it might have been; but—mushrooms! Who in the world would prepare bad mushrooms?”

Vasilissa left the kitchen. But Maria Semenovna could not calm herself. Angrily she stirred the pots about.

“They have made scandal and scandal, and confusion and confusion. And now they want to turn the blame upon *me*. They have cooked such a broth as even the devil couldn’t eat. And now, bless my soul, do *you* gobble it up! They have made Maria Semenovna the culprit . . . As though I couldn’t distinguish a bad mushroom from an eatable one? As though I ever put a bad

mushroom into a dish? To think that I should ever do such a wrong to a human creature! Twenty years have I been at the range I am not just a plain cook—a kitchenmaid serving as a cook!

I have a whole packet of testimonials alone The late Madame Gololobov, the General's wife, was a lady of importance enough, yet she never called me anything else than 'Maria Semenovna' And the millionaires Pokatilov once gave me a gold watch and chain at Christmas time. Just for a sauce And now, look you, what have people invented? 'Maria Semenovna gave the Director some bad mushrooms to eat'!

I had not expected such an insult—I who have served and done my best I was sorry for this Vasilissa here, and more than once I've held my tongue, in her presence, about her husband's young sweetheart And here's folk's gratitude for you! Just injustice it is!

And Communists at that "

"Why be so angry and offended, Maria Semenovna?" returned Vasia judicially as he stirred his soup with gusto 'Isn't it all one, what they tell us to say? Besides, anyway you can't hide truth in a bag And it's not you that will have to answer for it It is merely to make the scandal less that they are lying about the mushrooms For myself, I'm enjoying it all A re-e-regular mix up! A tragedy! *There's* a cinema picture for you Cheer up!"

Then you find it cheerful, you stupid young lad! A man dying in there, and you with your cheerfulness! What has come about

nowadays? No one respects life . . . Just anything, puff-puff! and they shoot a man . . . And they don't spare their own lives either. And all because they have forgotten God! . . ."

"Now, down with God! . . . Though I'm not a Communist, I don't believe in that God of yours."

"And a great pity that you don't . . . But why are you just sitting there, and wagging your tongue, and doing no work? Help me clean the crockery . . . Aye, those rascally doctors; what a lot of it they've dirtied . . . It's always tea and entertainment of all sorts for them . . . Yet, all the same, they can do nothing . . . As it has been ordained of God, so it will be. I said as much to that hussy who serves Vladimir Ivanovitch's sweetheart . . . I had just begun to serve supper to the doctors when she comes running in here from the back passage. She was rustling her petticoats, and had tied a muslin bow on her head that looked like a white butterfly, and was giving herself airs all over. 'My mistress,' she says, 'has sent me to ask how Vladimir Ivanovitch is getting on.' 'His state,' I replied, 'is such that he may soon surrender his soul to God, seeing that God punishes each of us for our sins. So tell your precious mistress that she had better go to church, and repent . . . For, by heavens, it is she, and no one else, who has ruined the man.'"

With Vasilissa Maria Semenovna was taciturn, sparing of words; but, on the other hand, she needed but to find any other interlocutor, and to stop her become impossible!

In the house everything had suddenly become hushed . . . Previously, for some days, there had been bustle, with Managers and colleagues running in , with doctors holding consultations . . . Liza would sit with Vasilissa each evening, to prevent her from fretting in solitude, from awaiting the issue in solitude . . . What troubled Liza was that she felt guilty for having egged on Vasilissa against Vladimir Ivanovitch

" It was not you, Liza ; I myself egged myself on . . . But when I looked death in the eyes I realised that nothing in the world was dearer to me than he ! . . . How could I go on living without him ? And here have I proved his undoing . . . "

Now Vasilissa was sitting on Vladimir's bed, and resting her curly head upon a hand. And she was thinking that if Vladimir should die she would not be left behind to live . . . The Revolution ? The Party ? . . . But the Party required only persons who had no crimes upon their conscience. And always it would remain with Vasilissa : that she had destroyed Vladimir ! And it would have been because of what ? Because of feminine jealousy ! . . . If only Vladimir had indeed concealed fraudulent dealings with a knave like Savelev, and so had gone against the people's interests, there would still have been pardon for Vasilissa. But, as it was, she had sent her friend to his death because of another woman

And what a friend ! . . . She had thought : that he did not love her ! How could he not be loving her when he had gone as far as he had done, and devoted himself to death ? It meant, did it not, that to him, Volodia, too, life would not be desirable without her, without Vasilissa ? Great though was the pain in Vasilissa's heart, the realisation none the less made her ready to weep. Not bitterly, but sweetly-repentantly . . .

Vasilissa looked at her beloved husband, and whispered so tenderly : " Do you pardon me, darling one ? Will you forget my cruelty, precious one of mine ? "

Vladimir stirred. Uneasily he turned his head.

" Some drink . . . Some drink . . . "

" In a moment, my own ; in a moment, my dearest. "

Carefully Vasilissa raised Volodia's head from the pillow, as the Sister had taught her to do, and gave him a beverage.

Vladimir drank. He opened his eyes. He looked at Vasilissa. He looked, but as though he saw not.

" Are you better, Volodechka ? " And Vasilissa bent over him solicitously.

Volodia did not reply. He now opened, now closed his eyes.

" Is Ivan Ivanovitch here ? "—in a weak voice.

" No, he is gone. Do you want him ? "

He nodded : " Call him back again . . . By telephone. "

" But the doctor has forbidden you to occupy yourself with business. "

Or

On Vladimir's face there showed themselves impatience and suffering.

"Do not worry me now Call him back again" And he closed his eyes

Vasilissa's heart contracted Why had he said "Do not worry me now"? Did it mean that he would not pardon her for having brought him to the pangs of death?

Vasilissa duly re-summoned Ivan Ivanovitch

When he arrived Vladimir asked Vasilissa to leave the room He wished to be alone with Ivan Ivanovitch

Vasilissa went out into the garden

A bush of red roses was flowering Dahlias were brilliant with many colours The sunshine was hot, and scorched hands, shoulders, head The garden was riotously overgrown, with honeysuckle bushes intertwined with lilac, and studded with tufts And the sky was not blue with the heat, but like molten silver

Vasilissa walked along the hot pathways

No, Vladimir was not going to forgive her! Not going to forget! If only she had come to his call that morning—nothing would have happened She had lost him now, lost him for ever! Not as a husband lover, but as a friend-comrade Volodia would never again trust Vasilissa He would not consider her "his stay"

Vasilissa bent towards the same white acacia tree which had flowered so richly with white tufts in the spring She closed her eyes

Why had she not poisoned herself? Why was she still alive? . .

"Vasilissa Dementievna! Vladimir Ivanovitch is calling for you." This was Ivan Ivanovitch crying out. He was just entering the motor-car.

Whither? Perhaps with a message to the sudarushka? But Vasilissa did not care now.

What has been one cannot restore.

It was hot; the summer sun was wearisomely scorching. The lattices were closed. Vladimir was dozing. Vasilissa was kneeling at her husband's bedhead, and driving away the flies.

Let Volodia sleep. Let him rest. He has been tormented.

In the house there were only Vasilissa and Volodia. Maria Semenovna had gone out to make purchases. The pageboy Vasia was out on leave.

Vasilissa was glad to be alone with Volodia. It was as though now he belonged wholly to her, to her and no one else . . . So helpless and weak.

If only he could understand! If only he could look into her heart . . . He would see how warmly Vasilissa's heart loved him. How it was wearying, feeling chilled, craving Volodia's caresses . . . Why was Volodia always so silent, sullen with her? Never did he look into her eyes . . . One could not even rearrange a pillow but that vexedly

he said : " Another Sister of Mercy ! To put a pillow straight is beyond her ! "

Of course, what could one expect of a sick man ? Yet, all the same . . . Why was it so ? Was it that he would not forgive her ? Ever ? And they would remain to live together, but things would be as now—cold at heart, lonely, painful ?

Vasilissa looked at Vladimir. At the well-known, dear face. And at the eyelashes—like rays. They were what Vasilissa had first fallen in love with . . . And he with Vasilissa's braid. That braid was no longer ! . . .

As in the tale : she had charmed with a lock, and the lock had been cut off, and her beloved had departed . . . Yet how they had loved one another ! Then, in '17 . . . And later, when the " Whites " had been attacking . . . On the night when, together, he and she had gone to arrest " conspirators " . . .

" Even if they kill me, Vasia, mind that you do not set aside the work for a single hour. You shall do your weeping afterwards."

" And you the same, Volodia. We give one another the promise." They had clasped hands, looked into one another's eyes, and gone quickly to the work . . . And the night had been frosty . . . Stars had been scattered about the sky . . . And over the snow there had gone crunching the footsteps of the detachment with which Vasilissa and Volodia had been marching . . .

As Vasilissa recalled these things her heart melted and melted as under a ray of past, bright

happiness . . . Vasilissa had not wept when the catastrophe had occurred ; she had not complained. She had merely endured. She had wholly forgotten self. But now the tears flowed over her cheeks, albeit that they were not tears of anger, or of bitterness ; they were tears sweetly melancholy. She was weeping for the past happiness, for the fact that it was gone, and could never be recovered . . . In no way ! At no time ! . . .

“ Vasia, Vasia ? . . What are you thinking of ? ” Volodia raised his head from the pillow, and looked at Vasia, and his eyes were no longer strange, unseeing, cold, but “ his own,” the real Volodia, eyes—kindly, solicitous, although sad.

“ About what is it, Vasiuk ? About what, my poor one, are you weeping ? ”—and he placed a hand ever so caressingly upon Vasilissa’s curly head.

“ Volodia, beloved ! My precious one, will you forgive me ? Will you forgive me ? ”

“ You are a little fool, Vasia . . . What have I to forgive ? . . Do not weep so. Suppose we have a talk. Sit here, nearer to me. That is it. We are living in silence. But both of us are finding it irksome.”

“ Still, you must not excite yourself . . . I am afraid, dear one. Another time might be better.”

“ No, at another time one would not say one’s say properly. Let me relieve my mind. I have been much worried, Vasia. That is why I tried to leave this life. And now, though I wish again to live, I see no way out . . . ”

"Let us seek one together, Volodia ! I have not become a stranger to you "

"Do you know all, Vasia ? "

"I do " She nodded her head

"Then now you understand my trouble ? My pain ? And you used continually to reproach me for follies You used to inveigh against Saveliev "

I know, Volodia "

'And in another matter you were wrong you used to think that there was love there, did you not ? But no, Vasia I live to love only you, my angel preserver, my faithful friend

If you like, call it an 'attraction'—anything you please, save only love And you were jealous of me, suspected me, spied upon me "

"Never, Volodia—never ! "

But how 'never' ? Do not you remember the incident of the dress material ? Do not you remember how inquisitive you were as to why a smell of scent came from me ? Or where does Saveliev live ? Show, show me ! "

"I was not playing the spy, Volodia That is not true Conjectures were torturing me I used to drive them away, Volodia I did not want to suspect you I did not want to lose my belief in you "

'Well, admit the conjectures But, all the same, you were jealous You did not say so outright, but you tormented me You worried me It is no good talking, though ! Both of us were at fault "

A silence Both of them were thinking

"Volodia, surely our life is not going to be like that now?" Vasilissa asked sorrowfully.

"I do not know, Vasia . . . I myself am at a loss. What to do I have not a notion."

And again both of them were silent. Much was in the minds of both, and yet the one could not make a way through to the other. A wall had grown up.

"Perhaps, Volodia, you would indeed do better with her, with that other one?" Vasilissa queried cautiously, whilst feeling surprised that it did not hurt her to put the question.

"Vasia! Vasia! You do not believe me, I see! . . . Does not even the fact that I faced death when I realised that I was losing you act as indicator as to whom I love?" There was reproach not only in the voice, but in the eyes . . .

A heart quivered with joy; Vasilissa's brown eyes became lit up with happiness . . .

"Volodia! My darling husband!"

She fell upon his breast, clasped his neck with her arms, sought Volodia's lips.

"No, you must not act so, Vasia! Calm yourself, Vasiuk! . . . You see, I have no strength . . . And I still cannot kiss . . ."

Vladimir smiled, stroked Vasilissa's head, but in his eyes there was once more care . . .

No, there was no overthrowing the wall which had grown up between them. No finding a path which could lead to the heart of the other through the thorny thicket of estrangement . . .

Vladimir spent a first day at work again—went to the Management offices. And Vasilissa was glad of the freedom. She hastened, early in the morning, to the Partkom, and thence to the mat factory. Liza had asked her help, for it was necessary to get ready for a union convention.

Vasilissa hurried along to the Partkom, and smiled to herself. It was as though they had let her out of a cage. Vasilissa was glad to see everyone, she felt as though she had not seen the comrades for no one could say how long. And they were glad to see *her*—they had missed her. All the comrades liked Vasilissa. She was businesslike. Not a mischief maker. She responded to grief. She arrived at the Partkom, and at once they re-harnessed Vasilissa to work, the work of annotating theses, of furnishing materials in company with reporters . . .

Vasilissa looked at the clock: my fathers! eight o'clock. Vladimir, by heavens, would long have been waiting. Would they, without her, have given him for dinner everything that the doctor had ordered? Vasilissa had forgotten about this. The company walked homeward with Liza, and discussed Muscovite items which comrades had brought from the Centre. Much in the Party now was becoming unintelligible. Liza—well, she, for one, "did not agree with such a line." She sided with the factory's "children." The latter were presenting candidates of

their own for the Partkonferentzia ;¹ again there would be conflict with the Partkom. Vasilissa envied her : she herself had come thither, yet could take no real part in anything. Not of the Party, as it were, she was, but only a sympathiser with it.

"It all comes of your having made yourself the Director's wife. You ought to have gone on living on your own, and then you could actively have shared in the work."

Vasilissa sighed. And she knew it without Liza telling her. But it was no good thinking of it now. Once let Vladimir get properly well again, and she would go and visit her own gubernia.

"You will not go ! You are tied too fast to your Vladimir Ivanovitch. You have become a 'wife'." Liza spoke vexedly. But, after all that Vasilissa had just lived through, she, Vasilissa, did not mind that. At least Vladimir was alive still ; at least he was not suffering.

Vasilissa reached home. But there was no Volodia there.

"Where is Vladimir Ivanovitch ? Has he not returned yet ?"

"Indeed he returned. He was at home by three o'clock, and awaited you to dinner . . . He waited, waited. You did not come. He dined with Ivan Ivanovitch. And, not long since, they departed in the motor-car." Such Maria Semenovna's information.

"Aye, and there's a note for you on the table."

Vasilissa caught up the note.

¹ This Communist term would seem to be self-explanatory.

"Dear Vasia, we have agreed that henceforth there shall be between us only the truth, and that you will always understand me To-night I have to be 'there' Later I will explain to you why, and you will realise that it has to be thus. According to our agreement I beg of you not to be distressed
Your Volodia "

Vasilissa read She let fall her hands

Again? Then in no way it was ended? Yet why should she have thought that it was ended? Had Volodia said so? Had she not known quite well that Ivan Ivanovitch was sitting hither—thither, serving as the connection between Volodia and "that woman"? Volodia was honourably fulfilling that which she had asked of him "the truth, and just the truth alone" Why, then, was Vasilissa so hurt? Why did there arise again that bitterness of offence; why did anger against Volodia stir again, as though again he had "deceived" her?

Maria Semenovna was laying the table, and glanced at Vasilissa with disapproval

"Will you have anything to eat?" she asked
"Or maybe you're brewing trouble again. first the one does not eat, and then the other one does not eat, no matter how one gets ready! . . . And now again quarrels, and tears, just because the one does not humour the other! As you will, Vasilissa Dementievna, be angry with me, or *don't* be angry, but I'll tell you the truth straight out you're not the wife for Vladimir Ivanovitch! You're going to distress yourself now over his letter, and to shed tears, because he's

gone to his sweetheart . . . But *I* say—do you go shares in him ! . . . The man, one may say, has just risen from a deathbed, after taking poison for your sake, and you, as soon as ever he's out of the house, bowl off on your own account . . . If it was on service, that's another thing. Service demands its own. But it was, by heavens, just to wander about amongst your 'meetings' . . . To 'enlighten' our fool-old women ! Before teaching others you should put things in order in your own home. There would be time enough then for you to 'serve' . . . Not a home this is, but a regular hovel ! ”

And, slamming the door wrathfully, Maria Semenovna departed to the kitchen. But a few minutes later she returned more “well-intentioned,” with a hot omelette and a tumblerful of cocoa.

“Have a bite, Vasilissa Dementievna, and leave your thoughts alone . . . Never think over-much ! . . . ”

Maria Semenovna sat down beside Vasilissa at the table, and began to recall how a similar occurrence had befallen in the house of the late Madame Gololobov, wife of the General ; save that in that case it had all come of a “governess,” of a “Frenchy.” And later the General and his lady had become reconciled. And they had lived together on excellent terms right up to the lady's death. And they had even been very happy ! . . .

Vasilissa listened with one ear only, but did not cut Maria Semenovna short. During the time of Vladimir's illness Vasilissa and Maria

Semenovna had "become friends together." Maria Semenovna was sorry for Vasilissa, and Vasilissa detected in Maria Semenovna a "kindred" human being; she was weary of the specialist-doctors, and of the members of the Management. All of them were bourgeois. But, on the other hand, Vasilissa now had to listen to Maria Semenovna's interminable tales of how the millionaires Pokatilov had lived, and of what "the late General's lady" had liked . . . This bored Vasilissa, but she hesitated to offend Maria Semenovna. The latter was a good soul, although on first acquaintanceship she had seemed sullen.

At the present moment Maria Semenovna's tales particularly irritated Vasilissa. She wanted to be left alone. She wanted once more to think it all over. To explain something to herself. To consider something to the end.

"Thank you, Maria Semenovna, for the meal. I will go now, and look through my papers again."

"But is that all that you're going to eat? If I'd known that, I should never have got it ready . . . You are killing yourself, Vasilissa Dementievna, like this! And it simply isn't worth it! . . . Why, to tell the truth, Vladimir Ivanovitch's mistress can be priced at a groat! She's not as good as your little finger."

Liza had said the same.

"Why do you think that, Maria Semenovna? They say that she is very nice-looking."

"Nice-looking, indeed! Painted and powdered like one of your clowns! And in her mind

—just rubbish, and how to get as much out of men as possible.”

“Do you know her? Have you seen her?”

“How should I not know her? Until you came, how many nights did she not spend here, the jade! Fanciful she is. Heat her up water for the night . . . Serve her with this, serve her with that . . . She plays at being ‘a lady,’ and says that from childhood she has been brought up to the gentry life . . . But all the time she’s lying. Nothing of the sort! The real gentry were polite. Always they said ‘thank you’ and ‘please’ to their servants, whereas this hussy, I’d have you to know, just orders: ‘Give me such-and-such! Do such-and-such! . . . Clear away!’”

“What is her name?”

“What is her name? Nina Konstantinovna. And she has a fancy surname as well, but I can’t remember it . . . She is just called, in the town, Nina Konstantinovna.”

“I should like to see her for once,” Vasilissa said meditatively as she turned Volodia’s letter over and over in her hands.

“Simple enough! Every day that there’s music she walks in the Town Gardens. Let us go there to-morrow. Let us take a look at this card queen! Many such as she used to walk the streets in Moscow of a night . . .”

“She goes to the music, you say? Then suppose we too *do* go, Maria Semenovna. When I get a look at her things may become easier for me.”

Maria Semen^{ov}na nodded her head doubtfully. But she did not dissuade Vasilissa. She herself was curious as to how these "rivals" would look at one another.

Vasilissa walked about the dark dwelling. She did not want to kindle a light. Things were easier in the obscurity.

There was no rest for her. In the morning all had seemed well. Volodia had been restored to health, and set about work again. And Vasilissa herself had betaken herself once more to business. Soon she would be departing to her own gubernia. She was not going to make herself in very fact a 'Director's lady'! From the time when she had made the agreement with Vladimir as to 'the truth' she had felt lighter in soul. Yet now—again she was fretting. It was not exactly that jealousy was tormenting her, the serpent was not daring again to raise its head. Vladimir had not sinned against the "agreement." He had told Vasilissa the truth as to a "friend." Yet, all the same, Vasilissa was not comfortable at heart.

Vasilissa reproached herself. What more did she want? Surely she did not suppose that Vladimir now had returned to her in whole, integral, and had altogether ejected "that woman" from his heart? There the trouble

lay—that Vasilissa should thus have supposed. She had hoped so. She had desired so.

But it had worked out : that something or another they had not tolerated, and that now they had returned to that very thing. Again Vladimir was spending his evenings with “that woman,” and Vasilissa was flitting in solitude about the darkened dwelling . . . Volodia had no pity for her. He did not spare her. Whom, then, did he love ? It was impossible to understand. Her, Vasilissa, the friend-comrade ? Or that other woman, his beauty ? He said that he loved Vasilissa, but in point of fact something else resulted. These thought-doubts made things more insistent still. She must know whether, as she would say to him, he had lost his affection for her. She would go away. But, as things were, how was one to go away ? And all at once, perhaps, to make a mistake again ? And all at once, perhaps, he again to lay hands upon himself ? No, it was not possible now for Vasilissa to leave Vladimir ! How could she now, with this pain in her heart, live at a distance from him ? Things would be easier in his vicinity . . .

She loved Vladimir, come what might ! If she had not loved him, would she have been so distressed ? Would she so have suffered ? Would she so have ached for him ?

She loved him, but ever less and less understood him. They, as it were, were traversing a forest by two paths which had branched apart on leaving the open, and, the further that the forest was entered, were diverging more and more . . .

She loved Volodia, but, in her soul, kept ever more and more frequently criticising him. Why had Volodia tied himself to such a woman? Had she been "one of us," a Communist, it would not have been so shameful. But, as it was, good gracious! She was nothing else than a true 'bourgeoise.' Volodia himself had confessed to Vasilissa that the woman was an outsider. A baryshnia. A dvorianka. Spoilt. Did not understand the Bolsheviks, the Communists. Yearned for the old life. Lived in luxury. Kept, of servants alone, in the house, seventeen persons. Had a horse of her own—one for riding, broken to a lady's saddle. Her father had gone with the Whites. Her mother had died at the time of the Revolution. Her brother, an officer, had disappeared without word left. She had remained alone. She had taken a post. She knew every language. For work as a "correspondence clerk" she had landed up in the Management's offices. There Volodia had become acquainted with her. She had fallen in love with Volodia. She had written him letters. Vasilissa had been far away. Volodia had always been alone and alone. They had come together. In the offices people had quickly detected it. They had begun to look askance at her, at Nina Konstantinovna. She had given up her post. And then Saveliev had taken her into his service as a sort of secretary.

Only as a sort of secretary?" Vasilissa had

*Lady

*Woman of the dvorianin, or landed-aristocratic, class.

been unable to help asking. Partly she had wanted to "prick" Volodia; partly she had wanted to learn the truth about "that woman."

"Why do you start slanders of that kind?"—Vladimir had fired up, and even turned red. "And you are not ashamed, Vasia, to repeat such vilenesses? I should not have expected that you would begin to throw mud at her like an old woman! For what reason, Vasia? . . . It is not like you! . . ."

Then he had told Vasilissa that Saveliev stood to Nina Konstantinovna in place of, as it were, a father or a guardian. He had been acquainted with her parents. As Nina had been left alone in the world, he had taken care of her. He had helped her with both advice and money. He had got her the post in the Management's offices. Then, when she had left the offices, Saveliev again had come to her help. She had been without a room. Whither was she to go? To Vladimir's—had been impossible. Saveliev had proposed her living at his own place. Nina Konstantinovna had not wanted to do so. One might as well go upon the street! Then Saveliev had found a self-contained flatlet, organised it as his personal offices, and proposed to Nina to quarter herself in the same . . . Yes, he, Saveliev, was merely a sort of guardian to Nina. He looked after her, was sorry for her . . .

"And courts her," again Vasilissa had been unable to forbear, so "affectionately" had Volodia spoken of "that woman"! . . . Anger had gripped Vasilissa. He was terribly credulous! . . .

Whereas Vasilissa did not believe in "that woman"; everyone said that she was a "wanton" ! . . .

Again Vladimir had fired up

"A lie ! Slanders ! How do you come to be so willing to pick up every sort of filth ? . . If you wish to know the truth ask me. Nina pays attention to no one . . . Nina loves me alone ! And even if it was so ? Nina is a beauty. After her not Saveliev alone goes trailing . . . Do you know Makletsov, of the Vnieshtorg¹ ? He offered her diamonds and every species of luxury, but Nina showed him the door . . . I do not deny that Saveliev may be not indifferent to Nina, and love her not merely in a fatherly way ; but Nina on her side, cherishes for him aversion alone . . . For him as a man, of course. So there cannot be anything in that quarter. Yes, I assure you ! It is impossible to think of it. Oh, I know Nina !"

And he had fumed as though he had been persuading, not Vasilissa, but himself. Vasilissa had noticed this. But what chiefly had offended her had been the fact that Saveliev was inserted into everything. Not for nothing had she so failed to take to him from the first day. Not for nothing had they said in the K.K. : "Let Vladimir Ivanovitch keep further away from him."

"However, the point is not that Saveliev is mixed up with it . . Rather, tales run : that you two keep 'the sudarushka' on common account, half and half ! . . ."

"And you can spit in the eyes of that, whoever says it ! Although you, Vasia, will not understand

¹ Department of Foreign Trade

me, my trouble lies in the fact that I took Nina as a virgin. She was pure . . .”

Pure ?

This had been like a fine needle run into Vasilissa's heart That night at tea, in Vasilissa's room during the year '17, he had said : “ I will give my heart only to a pure maiden ” . . . And later, on another night, during the “ honeymoon,” whilst caressing Vasilissa, he had said : “ A purer being than you does not exist in the world.”

“ Pure ! What foolishness you chatter, Vladimir ! Does the purity of the human being lie in the body ? You have begun to think in bourgeois fashion.”

Vasilissa had been vexed ; she had conceived anger against him.

“ Understand, Vasia, that not I think thus, but she . . . For her the fact that I took her, yet have not married her, is a great grief ! . . She now considers herself ‘ fallen ’ . . . You cannot think how she worries about it ! . . To her tears there is no end . . . You must understand, Vasia, that her ideas are not according to our own fashion, to the proletarian fashion. He who first took her, let that man marry her as well . . .”

“ Why have you not told me this before ? Who is hindering you from marrying her ? I, indeed ? ”—Vasilissa, in her turn, had fired up.

“ Ah, Vasia, Vasia ! You are clever enough, but as soon as the matter comes to love you are a woman like all the rest ! . . How am I to marry her when she and I are different, Vasia ? When in everything we are unlike ? When I have no

real affection for her ? . . Rather, it is pity . . . Judge for yourself."

Only pity ? Could that be true ?

Vasilissa's heart had trembled with joy. She had wanted to believe : " only pity " ?

" If there is no love or understanding between you and her, why do you keep on with the tie ? It must be pain for you both ! " Vasilissa had left herself unmentioned.

" But how could I throw her off, Vasia ? That would not be so simple. If I were to depart, whither could *she* betake herself ? On to the street ? Or to be kept by Saveliev ? Or to become a registered prostitute ? "

" Why should she be kept ? Suppose she applied herself to work ? "

" That is so easy to say ! To work, indeed ! Try seeking work now, when reductions are taking place everywhere. And what sort of work ? It would not do for Nina to go into a factory ! "

Vasilissa had yearned to cry out : why not into a factory ? Just think of such a fine lady ! But she had spared Vladimir. He was still unwell. The doctor had bidden her " guard " him, not agitate him . . . And, even without that, he had been upset with the conversation.—

But now, as she flitted about the dark dwelling, Vasilissa wondered regretfully why she had not cried aloud the truth. Why had she not told Vladimir all that she had thought of that " woman deceiver " ? She did not believe Nina Konstantinovna, that she loved Vladimir. Merely she kept

him entangled so that she might reap gain from two at once . . . Vasilissa did not dislike her because she appeared to be a "wanton," but because she was not pure of heart . . . Besides, there were "wantons" who were better than the most respectable women in existence. Vasilissa remembered the curly-headed Zinka whom later the Whites had shot, but who, even when dying, had cried : "Long live the Soviet Power ! Long live the Revolution !" A "street woman" she had been, of the lowest category, but as soon as the Revolution had begun she had, as it were, brightened all over. And she had undertaken the most warlike and perilous commissions . . . She had worked on the Cheka. With her very soul. If Vladimir had loved such a woman Vasilissa could have understood it . . . But a "baryshnia," a bourgeois lady. One alien . . . And, at that, "without heart" . . . She was leading Vladimir by the nose. He, in his credulity, believed her. That was what was so vexing ! That was what was so bitter ! That was what Vasilissa could never become reconciled to ! . . .

With what was the woman holding him ? With pity : I am weak, helpless . . . "Pure," too, she was . . . "Pure" ! . . . Well, since then there had come to remain of that "purity" of hers not a single blank spot ! Long ago had she smirched all her "purity" with men in return for gifts. And he still believed in her ! And he still "pitied" her ! . . .

Vasilissa boiled in heart. Anger against "that woman" tore her in pieces.

"Vasilissa Dementievna, my dear, are you going to bowl up and down the place much longer?" was Maria Semenovna's brusque interruption of Vasilissa's thoughts. "You should store your strength. You will find it useful for your 'meetings.' Go and lie down as you ought to do. It is no good waiting up for your husband. If he is making love to another woman you will not be receiving him to your own room. I will make him up a bed there, in the drawing-room."

Vasilissa embraced Maria Semenovna. And then she became still more depressed. A queer creature, but she was "sorry for" her, Vasilissa . . . And he, the beloved, her husband, friend—he was sorry only for that, the other, woman . . . A woman heartless, cunning, as *encoiling* as a snake . . .

"Vasiuk, are you asleep?" Vladimir entered the bedroom, and lit the lamp

Vasilissa was in bed, but her eyes were wide-open. Could one sleep with such pain in one's heart?

"No, I am not."

"Are you angry with me, Vasiuk? Are you?"

He seated himself upon the bed, and tried to kiss Vasilissa.

But Vasilissa resolutely turned away.

"So that is it! you *are* angry! . . . But what of the agreement? I have told you the truth as

to a friend . . . You yourself asked it of me. And there results the point of whether lying might not be better ? ”

Vasilissa said nothing.

“ It would not be well, dear one, for us again to begin reproaching one another, quarrelling . . . For what reason are you angry ? That I have been to see Nina ? Remember, Vasia, that all this time you and I have been inseparable. And she is alone. Do you suppose that she has not been worried to excess about my illness ? That she has not suffered ? ”

Vasilissa could well have exclaimed : “ And what about myself ? ” But she closed her lips firmly. She said nothing. Only her heart beat. It knocked.

“ Do not imagine, Vasia, that anything has happened there. I did not visit her alone, but with Saveliev. Later Ivan Ivanovitch also arrived . . . We had to talk things out . . . You want to know, do you, why I went to her to-night ? Well, know you shall, Vasia—I went to bid her farewell . . . What are you looking at ? Do not you believe me ? Then ask Ivan Ivanovitch. It was for that that I invited him, so that he should take upon himself all the necessary steps, help Nina Konstantinovna to leave here, settle up about her flat, and so forth.”

“ Where is she going to ? ” Dully, this.

“ To Moscow. Saveliev will escort her thither ; he has kinsfolk there, and Nina will live with them. Also, she will seek a post there. Thus things will be easier for everybody.”

Vasilissa said nothing, but in her eyes there was—distrust

'Why, suddenly, such a change?' at length she asked "What exactly has happened? Have you all at once lost love for her?'

'We will not speak of love That is another question The point is that Nina herself understands that things cannot continue thus To go to Moscow is Nina's own decision It has long been brooding in her She renounced her Volodika on the morning of the very day when you left me, Nina rang me up, and said that live longer in this fashion she could not Either—or! Otherwise she must depart for Moscow "

Ah, so that was it! So now we see the cause of your taking poison the one woman was gone, and the other one was threatening you—either marry me or goodbye! Now I understand! You were afraid of losing the other one? And I, forsooth, was a fool! An out and-out fool! Actually I thought it is out of grief for me that he has tried to take his life!

Vasilissa smiled an hysterical, cruel smile

How you distort everything now, Vasia! What a malicious woman you have become! You are not at all the old Vasiuk Fury Vladimir uttered the words with regret, and rose from the bed Evidently we shall gain nothing by continuing the conversation Yet I had wanted to say my say out, so that henceforth there should be nothing hidden between us

Well, by this time I perceive that, the more truth we get, the worse things grow. You have become alien, unkind ! . . .”

“No ! no ! Stay, Volodia do not depart,”—Vasilissa’s voice had a ring in it as of glass splinters. It was her anguished heart sounding a ring of despair. “If you wish to speak out, then speak out ! Why are you sending her off to Moscow ? It is not I whom you love—it is she ! . . . If you loved me you would have stayed with me to-night ! . . . Your care is only for her ! Only her do you pity ! . . .”

“Vasia, Vasia, how unfair you have become ! If only you knew how much Nina has suffered of late . . . Why, Vasia, she is still quite young, a mere child ! She has no intimate friend . . . All throw mud at her. And why, Vasia ? Because she has had the misfortune to love me ! . . . You, Vasia, have the Party and some friends . . . But she has—only myself. I am her only protector . . . Her only support.”

Vladimir paced the room with a hand laid behind his back, and told Vasilissa that Nina had, at one time, expected a child . . . His child . . . His—dream ! . . . What joy, and what sorrow !

“Where, then, is the child ?” Vasia jerked out.

“Do you suppose that Nina could have let it remain ? And there be a scandal ? And grief on your part ? We safeguarded you, rather . . . Nina wept, wore herself out . . . But eventually she and I made that decision, for your

sake, Vasia—yes, that Nina and I *would* go so far ! ”

For her sake ? He and a stranger woman had come to an agreement, he and that stranger woman had “ safeguarded ” her, Vasia, as though she had been not a friend, not a comrade, but rather, a sort of enemy ? Volodia had not come with his trouble to her, but to “ that woman,” to Nina. Surely, then, “ that woman ” was nearer to him ? Surely, then, not Vasilissa, but “ that woman,” had come to be “ his own,” his intimate, his kindred spirit ?

“ I learnt that Nina was enceinte on the day of your first arrival here. Now do you understand my trouble, Vasia ? ”

Vasilissa nodded in silence.

Vladimir continued his story. To obviate gossip, Nina had left the town for a certain other one. Saveliev had arranged things for her there. There she had had an abortion. But something connected with the operation had gone amiss—there had been a complication. Vladimir, therefore, had paid her a visit.

“ That, then, was when the porters struck ? ”

“ Yes, approximately ”

“ Hm ” “ Yes, that was why he had, on that occasion, wept in the dining room ! Because of Nina. Of course, not because of the porters ”

“ And did she return home on the morning when Saveliev also returned ? Is that so ? ” Vasilissa hazarded further

“ Yes ”

"Of course."

Both of them fell silent. As though they were expecting something more. As though at any moment there might gush forth angry, harsh words . . . Later one might repent of them, but it would be too late ! . . . They might let love fly loose, distort it like a face which smallpox has disfigured. And there would be no more colour in it, no more warming happiness . . .

"Vasia ! " Vladimir said, breaking the oppressive silence. "To what purpose is such trouble?"

Who is guilty in this matter ? I swear to you that I spared you—spared you to the utmost of my power . . . "

"You need not have spared me, Volodia. You ought to have believed that I was your friend . . . "

Vladimir seated himself beside Vasilissa again, and took her hand.

"Yes, Vasia, I know that you are my friend . . . That is why things are so difficult for me." And, of old habit, he laid his head upon Vasilissa's shoulder. And Vasilissa stroked the well-known head, and her pain became mingled with a sweet joyousness . . . All the same, he was here, with her, now ! All the same, he loved her after his own fashion ! . . .

"Volodia ! Perhaps it would be better if, not she, but I, were to go away ? " Vasilissa asked cautiously.

"Vasia ! do not begin again. Do not torment me. Instead of upholding me, you are jogging me towards the false road . . . I have expounded to you my soul, as to a friend . . . I have not a

single secret more from you Yet you say
I will go away."

"For your sake, Volodia . . . If you love
her"

"Love her, Vasia! Love is love, but do even
I know, Vasia, what Nina and I have in common?
She is not, never could be, a comrade and friend
such as you are I am just sorry for her,
troubled about her What would become
of her if I were to cast her off? If we were
entirely to part? I have a sense of responsibility
towards her Do you understand? You
see, I took her as a virgin"

"Well, Volodia, that is rubbish You merely
suppose the responsibility! She was not an
infant, she herself understood to what she was
going And who now pays attention to that?"

"That is the proletarian view But Nina is
different To her it is like a stone about her
neck "

'You see, then! That is why I say to you
I will depart, and do you marry her! . "

"Again, Vasia? I have begged of you do
not torture me! Besides, now it is too late
To-night we decided everything Nina Kon-
stantinovna is to leave for Moscow on Thursday
And—so the end Let us mark the full stop"

Vladimir spoke so quietly, firmly that Vasilissa
almost believed him

"And do you, dear Vasia, be patient for a few
days more Do not disturb yourself and me . . .
She will depart, and once more you and I will
live as of old And even better than as of old

Yet another grief shall we have lived through together ; still nearer to one another shall we stand."

Volodia embraced Vasilissa. He kissed Vasilissa's eyes.

"I should like to lie with you to-night, Vasiuk ! Will you let me ? I am tired ; my head is whirling, somehow."

Vladimir lay down. He rested his head upon Vasilissa's shoulder. And the next moment he was asleep.

But Vasilissa did not sleep.

If he loved her he would have caressed her ! If he loved her he would have divined Vasilissa's grief . . . She looked at Volodia's head. A well-known head, but the thoughts in it were alien, unintelligible. Volodia's eyelashes, ray-like, were hiding his kindly glances, and not turned in her direction . . . His warm lips, the lips of Volodia, were accustomed to thrill another woman with kisses—with languor, and in another woman to kindle desire.

The serpent thrust its sharp little tongue into Vasilissa's heart. It bit, worried it . . . Vasilissa threw off Volodia's head from her shoulder . . . A stranger he was ! . . .

"Why tease your 'Volia-Sunny' ?" Vladimir whispered, half-asleep.

"Volia-Sunny" ? What pet name was that ? Not one of Vasilissa's . . . He had got confused ! He was thinking of "that woman" even in his slumbers. Vasilissa looked viciously at her sleeping husband. *Was* he her husband ?

Was he the old friend-comrade ? *Was* he the man whom Vasilissa had loved in the days when he and she had contended for soviets ?

A stranger, quite a stranger

Vasilissa felt cold Lonely The serpent enveloped her heart in a tight coil It sucked at it. It worked its will upon Vasilissa . . .

The Town Gardens Dusty, stale Hot, exhausting summer was reigning Heaven's moisture had not fallen in showers Rain was absent Otherwise it would have washed the trees clear of town dust, given the withered turf to drink

Music

Few, though, of the public Children were gambolling Red soldiers were sitting in groups, or promenading near the music with "ladies" On a bench in shade a priest, in a cassock was seated with elbows on knees, and meditating Beside him a nurse girl was looking after a small child

Upon the same bench there seated themselves Vasilissa and Maria Semenovna—unobtrusively, but whence everything was visible

They were expecting to see Nina Konstantinovna

"It would be strange if we did not get a sight of our 'poppet' to-day Usually, when there's

music in the Gardens, there too there's our sudarushka. To flaunt her finery. Ladies come here on purpose to observe what are the day's fashions. They learn them from Nina Konstantinovna. She always has the very smartest."

Vasilissa listened distraughtly. She had a curiosity to see what Nina was like. But at the same time she was feeling uncomfortable. It seemed as though, see the woman, and her heart would break with pain.

"Is not that she? Look, Maria Semen'ovna—the one who has sat down upon a bench to the right of the band? . . . In pink."

"Well, what are you thinking of? . . . Nina Konstantinovna such a one as that! One can distinguish her at once from others. A show woman. A mannequin."

They sat. They waited.

Still, still no Nina.

They began to make up their minds as to whether to go home, and come again another day. And then, just at that moment, Nina Konstantinovna made her appearance. She came from the other end of the Gardens, and halted right beside the band. She was talking to Saveliev and two dandies. She seemed not to notice how the public was looking at her.

So *that* was what she was like! A white dress, light, enveloped all her figure in soft folds. Under the dress the breasts showed roundly sketched. On her hands were long gloves of sand yellow, and a hat of the same colour sat pulled forward over her eyes . . . The face it was impossible for

Vasilissa to make out. Only the lips were visible—as bright as though smeared with blood

“What lips she has—bloody!”

“That is from paint,” Maria Semenovna explained. “And you should see her eyes, how they’re coated with grease. I’d like to take a mop, and clear her face of the filth with a wash. You’d see then what she really was like! Pomaded and painted, I myself could become a beauty for you.”

Nina Konstantinovna was leaning upon a parasol of white lace, and playing with the point of a white shoe. She kept smiling, with faint nods of the head. The two dandies also kept smiling.

Savelie though he were the sand wit

“Her hat makes it impossible to get a view of her face,” Vasilissa said vexedly.

“Suppose, then, we walk past them . . . Then look your fill at our ‘poppet.’ Only, I should advise you also *not* to look! There are few good points about her. When I was in the service of Madame Gololobov, the General’s lady, I used to see real gentleman and beauties. But what is she?”

Curiosity, none the less, was torturing Vasilissa. Learn she must why Volodia loved “that woman.”

Vasilissa and Maria Semenovna had just risen, just started towards Nina, when she shook hands with the dandies, and threw at them on parting, loudly enough for the words to reach Vasilissa. “We shall meet, next, in Moscow.” Then she

turned away. She walked towards the exit. Saveliev behind her.

"Shall we overtake them? No, we had better not, Vasilissa Dementievna! . . . Well, look at her, the precious one . . . People know you, and you wouldn't escape gossip."

Vasilissa slackened her steps, but never took her eyes off Nina.

Tall. Straight. Walked with a movement of the shoulders. As she left the band at a distance she sank her head very low. And Vasilissa thought that Nina was weeping . . . Saveliev leant towards Nina, and said something persuasively. But Nina shook her head. "No," she was saying. And she raised a hand in a yellow glove to her face, as though to wipe away a tear . . . Was she, then, in very truth weeping? . . . Had she come to take leave of the music? Of course . . . Did it mean that she loved Volodia? And did not want merely to "draw upon" him? Vasilissa felt uneasy at heart. She had seen Nina Konstantinovna, but not gained relief. Not jealousy was troubling her. Another, a new, feeling was causing her torment; there was stirring in her a sort of compassion for "that woman" . . . About what was "that woman" shedding tears? Why had she gone to the music? To bid farewell to her happiness?

Yes, a new pain was worrying Vasilissa. And she felt vexed with herself: that still one had not got to the end of it! Here was she now going to ache for "that woman," for the separator! Again something new! . . .

Nina Konstantinovna departed to Moscow. And now this was the second week that there had been neither she nor Saveliev in the town. It might have seemed that Vasilissa needed but to live and enjoy herself. The "separator" was gone from her path. Vladimir remained alone with Vasilissa. That meant, then, that Vasilissa was the dearer, the more wanted, of the two women? It meant, then, that in very deed there had been something merely temporary, passing? Vasilissa smiled. Vasilissa laughed. And she coughed less. She went regularly to the Partkom. And Vladimir too was busy. He was reorganising the business according to the Syndicalists' plan. When that should be ended he was to go to Moscow with Vasilissa, and thence they would transfer Vladimir to his new "region." Vladimir was pleased. He entered wholly into his work. Everything seemed to be "in a nice way."

But of real joyousness, of the joyousness which had formerly existed, there was none, altogether none. As though there could have been! Vladimir was not exactly unkind, but impatient, and a sort of irritableness would rend him, he would fly into tempers with Vasilissa.

"Why was she late home for dinner from the Partkom? She had kept the guests waiting—one could not sit down to table without the hostess!" Another time he fired up about his collars—they did not look clean. Vasilissa fired up in response. Was that Vasilissa's business? He himself should deal with the matter. Let him ask Maria Semenovna about it. Vasilissa was

not his washerwoman . . . They parted in anger. And because of what? Because of a trumpery collar! Once, too, Vasilissa returned home in pouring rain. She had left her hat behind her at the Partkom—to save it, she had bound a kerchief over her head. Vladimir saw this, frowned, and nodded at Vasilissa as much as to say: what on earth are you walking about in? Your shoes are down-at-heel, your skirt is muddy, you have tied yourself up in a kerchief like a regular village woman . . . What a frump! . . . And again Vasilissa could not refrain from:

“Not all of us can flaunt about like mannequins! Nor is it proper to be indebted to a Saveliev!”

Vladimir looked at Vasilissa with angry eyes, but said nothing. Yet Vasilissa had an idea that he was longing to strike her. As it was, he restrained himself.

Things were not right. Vasilissa and Vladimir wanted to be friends; but, let the one have the least grudge against the other, and—temper seethed up.

Vladimir was always dreaming of his new “region.” How he would arrange his house there, how settle about the housekeeping . . .

This wearied Vasilissa. To what purpose was it to set up an establishment of one’s own? What was the pleasure of it? Would that there was a “Collective” for everyone . . . Vladimir did not agree. He reproached Vasilissa for “backsliding.”

For her part, Vasilissa related how in her

Marxist circle there had been a debate as to whether only economics made history, or whether 'ideas' also did that. Vasilissa grew animated, and wanted to share with Vladimir all that she had heard. But it bored him. All of it was fiddle faddle. Whereas, to increase the lucrativeness of an undertaking, that indeed was actual business! And again they disputed.

Whenever they were alone together they did not know what to talk about. Nor what to do. Sometimes they would summon Ivan Ivanovitch by telephone. In his presence things were freer.

Vasilissa looked for letters from her gubernia. But they did not come. Neither from Grusha nor from Stepan Alexeivitch a single word. Had something happened to them, one and all?

Vasilissa did not like to confess it to herself, but in the secrecy of her soul she was hoping to be summoned back to work in the gubernia. To go? Not to go?

All the same, a letter did arrive from the gubernia. A registered one. From Stepan Alexeivitch. Rather short, but practical. It proposed to Vasilissa that she should undertake a group of textile factories, and establish the work 'according to a new type' as the Centre prescribed. Vasilissa should live there, outside the town. He begged a reply.

Vasilissa's heart beat. She yearned for "her own people" . . . Else, what sort of a life was this? In it one had neither work nor enjoyment! . . . Only care: as to what might not happen next. One went about as though bound. Vasilissa remembered how her brother Kolika had had a jackdaw. He had caught it in the forest, and, so that it should not fly away, tied its wings with threads. The jackdaw had walked about the floor, gaped open its beak, looked at the windows with its black, intelligent little eyes, and clapped its wings. But the wings had been tied. It had clapped, clapped, cawed once or twice for sorrow, and then fallen again to strutting about the floor. As though, as a matter of fact, it had never made any preparations for flying away. So now Vasilissa as well. Her wings were tied. There could be no flying away! . . . And tied with what? Oh, if it had been with joy, if it had been with love! But it was not so—they were tied with anxiety. With fear as to whether something might not again befall Vladimir. With gratitude that he had remained with her, and removed the "poppet" from the path . . . Such the threads. Though slender, they enveloped Vasilissa closely. It was as though they concealed the very fact from Vasilissa, so artful was their envelopment . . .

Liza once said: "I do not recognise you, Vasilissa. I told you that you would become a 'Directress.' And so it has turned out."

How to cast off the threads? How to cast off the artful envelopment?

Vasilissa held Stepan Alexeivitch's letter in

her hands, and did not put it down. It was as though the letter, like the talisman in the tales, might discover to Vasilissa the road.

‘Vasilissa Dementievna, all our beer is finished. You had better tell Vladimir Ivanovitch to see that they send some more from the brewery. Else, guests might turn up for dinner, and then it would be run, turn yourself about, at least produce some from underground.’

And Maria Semenovna looked at Vasilissa. She was “not approving of” her.

“Always you keep playing tricks, Vasilissa Dementievna. But for what reason now, may I ask? They have sent off the ‘fine lady,’ with God, to Moscow. Vladimir Ivanovitch always stays with you now—stirs not a foot to go out as a guest. Why, then, should you look glum? Men do not like that. They appreciate a wife who is cheerful, so that there may be laughter in the home, and some pleasure await one after one’s cares and labours.”

Vasilissa listened to Maria Semenovna, and smiled, and thought to herself. “Perhaps she is right! Perhaps I ought to shake myself, and again become his ‘Vasia-Fury’! As I used to be in ’18. Do your work, and then at least have a laugh!”

How would it be if now she were to go to Volodia at the Management’s offices? Unexpectedly, as “a guest”? To tell him about the letter. And to say, smiling, that a refusal should be dispatched. For she could not part from Volodia! Let him see how she loved

him, the dear, the desired, one ! Let him be delighted . . . Let him embrace her in transports, kiss Vasilissa's brown eyes . . . Call her his "Vasia-Fury" . . .

Vasilissa got out the white blouse, and tied on to it a blue necklet. Then she put on her hat before the mirror, and straightened her curls . . . To-day she wanted to please Volodia. For she was bringing him a "gift" ! And what a "gift" ! Vasilissa's refusal of Stepan Alexeivitch's invitation to go and work in the gubernia. She was going to accompany Volodia to the new "region" —she would take up work there instead.

She reached the Management's offices. Straight into the cabinet, to see the "Director." But the cabinet was empty. The Director was at a session. It was coming to an end, though ; he would be there in ten minutes.

Vasilissa waited—looked at the Muscovite papers. She smiled to herself. For she was going to "repay" Volodia for all . . . For his having given up "that woman," for his having valued Vasilissa above everyone else . . .

They brought in a mail. They placed it on the Director's table. Were there no letters also for Vasilissa ? She turned over the business envelopes. And suddenly her heart went knock ! knock ! and stopped for a moment. An oblong, coloured envelope . . . The handwriting fine, elegant . . . No otherwise than from "her" . . . From Nina Konstantinovna.

So it was not ended yet ? So, as before, there was deception ?

It seemed to Vasilissa as though she were flying somewhere for a long, long time Never an end

She must have staggered, for she brushed against an inkstand on the table, upset it

She looked at the oblong, coloured envelope, and felt as though in the envelope her fate were lying concealed

Quick ! The envelope had been thrust into Vasilissa's pocket Now the truth would not remain hidden from her Now there would be an end of deception

Vladimir entered with the Managers

" Ah, Vasia, and you here ? Business is it, or have you just come to look me up ? "

' There is no more beer left An order must be given to the brewery "

' Oh, what a woman ! You are becoming a regular chatelaine ! There is no recognising the ' Vasia Fury, ' " laughed Volodia, as though pleased

Laugh on, laugh on ! I am going to tear in pieces the foul mesh in which you have enveloped me I am going to disclose your deceit to the bottom

" Well, Vasia ? So you have paid your visit now ? You are going again, I suppose ? "

Vasilissa nodded without speaking All within her was quivering, boiling, to the point of bursting forth

Vasilissa had not the patience to reach home before reading the letter She turned aside into the Town Gardens She seated herself upon a

bench. She tore open the coloured envelope. She could wait no longer.

“My Sunny Volia! My master, my beloved torturer! . . . From you again not a word. The third day—not a line. Surely you have not forgotten, fallen out of love with, your ‘Ninka the Capricious’?—Your ‘Egyptian Monkey’? I do not believe it! . . . Yet, all the same, I am afraid. You are with her, and I am all alone! Your manageress knows how to influence you; she will persuade you that our love is ‘a sin against Communism,’ that it is necessary, according to your, the Communist way, to ‘be frugal,’ to deny oneself everything that gives joy, to live only for the ‘Saturdayites’ . . . I am afraid of her. I know her power over you . . . My God, my God! yet, all the same, I am not taking you from her! I am asking so little. She is your generally recognised wife. You are with her always, always . . . And here am I begging of you only a few hours for our love? Only pity on your part for me. But for you, I have no one, no one in the world! . . . At nights I awake with the dread: but will he suddenly lose his affection for me, will he cast me off? What then will become of me? I fear to think. You yourself know that Nikanov Platonovitch watches me like a spider . . . Even though he plays at being my ‘little Papa,’ you and I are aware what really he is looking for! . . . O, how he would like you to cast me off! . . . That I should be left alone, quite alone, defenceless, helpless . . . That is when his festival would arrive! . .

There are days when I hate him, when I am ready to go upon the streets rather than feel that I am 'beholden' to him . . . Volia, Volia ! My beloved, incredibly dear one, surely this will end some day ? Surely some day you will rescue your Ninka ? Are not you sorry for her ? Will you not protect her ? . . . I am weeping, Volia . . . Have you no regret for 'the Monkey' ? Are not you thinking of her ? You are cruel ! You are naughty ! . . . You are, at this very moment, caressing another . . . You are making love to her ! I know that you are making love to her ! And this hurts me ! hurts ! hurts ! I want you . . . Ardent, unsated . . . Are not you longing for my lips ? . . . For our stifling embraces ? . . . My satiny arms yearn to twine themselves about you . . . My breasts—'cups of snow'—are wearying for a caress from you . . . Volia ! I cannot endure more ! I cannot live in separation Why did you send me away to Moscow ? For what reason ? But let this be for the last time When you pass to the new 'region,' find me a little house outside the town So that no one may know that I am there . . . A 'secret little house,' whither you can come and see me when darkness is falling . . . And where I can teach you that love such as ours is better, more important, than all, all else in the world ! . . . When are you coming to Moscow ? I suppose she will come with you even to Moscow ? Ah, if we could spend but one week together ! Have but one week as 'ours' . . . Nikanov Platonovitch says that in the new 'region' they

are going to assign you a charming detached residence . . . A dining-room in the Gothic style. But there is not included a dining-room lamp. I have seen here a wonderful chandelier—rather dear, but, on the other hand, veritably artistic. It will please you, I know. Now, I have chattered enough. Such a big letter that you will have nowhere where you can ‘hide’ it! . . . Here am I joking, but my desire is to weep . . . Surely you can feel in what pain I am? . . . Why, why does life not give us happiness? . . . Do not be afraid, O master of mine; I am not going to murmur any more. After all that I have suffered I am now ‘wise.’ Do as may be best for you. I shall reconcile myself to everything. Only one thing do not take away—your ardent caress-
ingness, your love-pity for your poor sorrowing, capricious Ninka. Moscow, Ostozhenka 18, Flat 7, and not 17 as you wrote last time, so that the letter very nearly went amiss. Your, from little feet to warm little lips, and only your, ‘sweet little girl’ Nina.”

In the margin the postscript: “Think what joy: I have come across, in Moscow, the *poudre c te d’or*.”

Vasilissa took long over the reading of Nina’s letter. She read it attentively. Word by word. Not merely with the eyes, but also with the heart.

She finished the task.

She laid the letter upon her knees. She gazed at the dry, dusty grass as in it a bee buzzed, seemed to grow angry, burrowed actively amongst the blades, and irritably shot away again into the

herbage In the spring, too, when the lilac
had been flowering, there had been bees
They had been other bees Joyous bees Where
as this one was wrathful, as though disappointed
with summer

It seemed to Vasilissa as though she were
thinking of the bee, not of the letter In her heart
there was a dullness Yet something altogether
not painful Rather, a complete indifference
Nevertheless the serpent already was working
It was glad to make the effort ! " Satiny arms "

 " Warm little lips " It lashed her
heart with its accursed tail as with a whip
Sorely, Sorely ! Cease, snake rascal, to torture
that heart Is there in that heart a corner which
is not filled with thy venom ?

Slowly, neatly Vasilissa folded the letter She
thrust it back into the envelope

She rose

She walked towards the exit Past the band-
stand To-day all was quiet here, unfrequented
There was no music Now Vasilissa knew whom
Vladimir loved Now Vasilissa knew that the
other woman was " his own "—not Vasilissa . .

Vasilissa issued into the clattering street from
the wicket gate of the dusty Town Gardens ,
and it seemed to her that there remained behind
her in the Gardens a tomb

Vasilissa was going home from a funeral
From the funeral of a dead happiness

Vladimir returned home earlier than usual. Full of smiles, cheerful. He brought joyful news : the long-expected decree from the Centre had arrived, his appointment to the new "region." It was necessary to leave, on a certain date, for Moscow.

"For Moscow? Well, well! . . . Go, then. I too shall be going : only, not to Moscow. To my own gubernia."

Vasilissa spoke as though calmly ; yet in her all was raging, all boiling. In her pocket there was the oblong, coloured envelope—Nina Konstantinovna's letter.

Vladimir did not remark Vasilissa's convulsed face ; he did not see the vicious sparks which were scattering themselves from her brown eyes. To him it was unknown why she should be sorting out her things in the bedroom, and packing them.

"So you have settled to visit your people. Excellent. We shall meet again in Moscow. Or will you come straight to the 'region.'?"

Hope had glowed in Vasilissa's heart—a last hope : that he would protest. That he would not let her go. Now even that hope had ceased to be . . .

"I am not coming to you in the 'region.' They are summoning me to work. I shall remain there. Not for a time only. Altogether. I have panted enough in this cage. I have played 'the

Directress ' enough Take for a wife one
of those who value such a life "

Vasilissa, as it were, choked She so heaped
word upon word, hurried, kept interrupting
herself She was going to allow herself to be
deceived no longer, she said, but was glad that
the end of love was come And she was tired of
having no work, of being amongst Syndicalist
bourgeois, only for Vladimir's sake had she
endured it, and it hurt her to find that to Vladimir
she was no longer necessary There was no
longer comradeship, no longer affection, between
them She was wife in the house merely to serve
as hostess, to act as a cover I live, she said, in
wedlock with a Communist, but another woman
is the wife for delectation, for love in "a secret
little house" Cleverly thought of it was !
Unfortunately, Vladimir and Nina had not taken
one thing into account whether she, Vasilissa,
would agree to such a repellent life ?

Vasilissa's eyes were angry, green As she
spoke she panted

Vladimir wagged his head irritably at Vasilissa
' Vasia ! Is this you ? I do not recognise
you If I conceal anything from you, it is only
to spare you '

' Thanks ! Your compassion is not neces-
sary to me I am strong Do you suppose that
only your love can set a candle in the window ?
For me your love—well, *there* is where it sits !
It gives me only pangs I would rather leave you
as soon as possible, tear myself away I shall
not want to know what you are doing Fondle,

make love to, whom you will . . . Lie, deceive. Become a General Director . . . Betray Communism ; it is all one now . . .”

But her heart was torn with anguish.

“Vasia, Vasia ! But our friendship ? But your promise—to understand everything ?”

“Our friendship ? Where is it ? Where is that friendship ? I do not believe you, Vladimir. You have killed my belief . . . You should have come to me, and said : ‘Vasia, a misfortune, such a calamity, has occurred ; I have fallen in love with another woman.’ Do you suppose that I should have withheld you ? Reproached you ? Gone against your happiness ? Have you forgotten, Vladimir, that I have not merely been a wife to you, but also a friend, a comrade ? That is wherein my affront lies ! That is what I will never, never forgive you . . .”

And the tears trickled over her wan cheeks. She wiped them away with a sleeve, and turned aside from Vladimir.

“I had faith in you as in a comrade . . . You have trampled it to pieces, Vladimir, and had no pity . . . And, once the one has no faith in the other, how can they live together ? . . . Evidently the end has come to our life, to happiness . . .”

Vasilissa’s heart was grieving. Vasilissa’s thin shoulders were shaking. Again she turned aside from Vladimir.

She sat down upon the bed. Vasilissa’s hands rumpled the silken quilt. And her eyes were full of woe and tears. Vladimir sat down beside her, and took her by the shoulders.

"You say that you are a stranger to me, that you do not love me No, Vasia If you had lost your love, would you have been so cast down ? And I ? Have I lost my love ? Understand me, then I do love Nina, but altogether in another way Without you, Vasia, there is no road for me Whatever I have done, I have always thought to myself 'But what would she advise ? Be it as Vasia may say !' You have led me like a star You are necessary to me , there you have it !'

"You always think only of yourself," Vasilissa wailed, 'and forget me I am stifled, Vladimir, with this life It is no trouble to me that you have set up a mistress The more painful thing is that we have ceased to be comrades "

'Do you think that I do not see that ! But where is the cause ? I myself do not understand it Apart it is wearisome for us , together it is constrained You say that formerly it was not so ? Yet, formerly, did we live so much together ? We had no family life Always at work, always on the wing Suppose, Vasia, it were again thus on the wing ! Should you wish it ? Each of us self by self But if we should be bored like that—we could come together again Yes ? Should you like it to be so ? And Vasia would then become 'Vasia Fury again Dear, intimate And there would be no deceit We need not tear things up, Vasia. We need not part That would be painful Pity me, Vasia "

Vladimir, as usual, hid his head upon Vasilissa's

knees, thrust his face into Vasilissa's warm lap . . .

A quietness. Both kept silence.

In a warm wave a forgotten thrill ran from the one to the other. The little spark of passion which had become ash-strewn with wrongs and distrust shot forth its little igniting tongues.

"Vasia ! Beloved one !"

Vladimir's arms masterfully embraced Vasilissa, drew her to him on his knees. With warm lips he exhausted those of Vasilissa, with caresses he fired Vasilissa's body.

Vasilissa did not oppose him. Vasilissa yielded to the sweet, forgotten thrill !

Be it so ! Now Vladimir was loving Vasilissa as of old. Without shame. Now Volodia was Vasilissa's. Now Nina was forgotten. Now Volodia was betraying Nina not only with his body ; he was betraying her also with his heart, with his soul.

Vasilissa felt unwontedly—malicious. Pained and joyful . . . *Let him "betray."*

There ensued strange days. Indeterminate days. The little spark of passion, glowing under the ashes of wrongs, of estrangement, as in a burnt-out bonfire which a gust of autumn wind keeps fanning, flared briskly, moved from spot to spot. It licked the scorched wounds, sought in the heart spots not yet touched with flame.

Tender did Vladimir become.

Submissively caressing did Vasilissa become.

As if anew did they "make love." The one could not exist without the other. By night they would lie closely pressed together, as though they feared to lose one another. Vladimir would kiss Vasilissa's brown eyes. Vasilissa would press to her heart Vladimir's familiar head . . . Thus had they never before loved ; thus had they never before caressed . . . With longing, with bitter joy. It was not exactly that they had found one another again , it was not exactly that they were taking leave of love . . . They were taking leave of a happiness gone, irrecoverable.

Vasilissa would smile, jest. And then it would seem to her : that the next moment she would burst with tears. Vladimir would caress Vasilissa, and look into her brown eyes, but in Vladimir's eyes Vasilissa would read unforgettable sorrow. There did not play in them the subtle spark of happiness ; they did not reflect Vasilissa's love . . . It was as though they were saying to Vasilissa without words, "Farewell."

Not to see Volodia's eyes, not to read in them tears, but to stay the grief of the inevitable, Vasilissa would twine her thin arms around Volodia's neck . . . Seek his lips . . . And Volodia would press Vasilissa to his heart, fondle her, fire her with caresses, seek Vasilissa's body . . . Insatiably. To slumberous weariness . . .

Strange days Indeterminate. Stifling. Dim. No happiness in them In them none of the light-winged joyousness which is born of love . . .

They came to an agreement. Vasilissa should, "for the time being," go to her gubernia for work. When Vladimir had got settled in the "region" they would write to one another. They would see one another sometimes. Where? They did not specify. And about a divorce—not a word. Seemingly all was simple, intelligible without that. Clear. "The whole truth," as it were. Of one thing Vasilissa did not speak, of the fact that she had discovered Nina's letter. She had hidden it. She was keeping the letter. As though it still might be useful for something. But she insisted: that you send, send a telegram to Nina in Moscow to say that you are going there alone. Why did Vasilissa do this? It was painful but, for some reason, "necessary." Vladimir stood on the alert—looked suspiciously at Vasilissa. As though he feared something. He sent the telegram. And became more caressing than ever with Vasilissa. More ardent than ever . . .

Be it so! This too was necessary. As though they were drinking the last drops of happiness which remained at the bottom of the common cup of life . . . And, in the drops, the headiness of passion, and the sweet gall of farewell . . .

Vasilissa was cheerful. Brisk. On the move. Volodia had not seen her so for long past.

"It is because I have thrown off a skin which did not fit me . . . What sort of a 'Directress,' I? . . . For you—another wife is wanted. For what am I

for a wife? In the presence of a 'Nep' I am no good at all." Vasilissa spoke jestingly, angrily.

"I do not know who you ought to be. I know merely that once more you are 'Vasia-Fury' . . . And I will not give up my 'Fury,' will not let her go, even if five Partkoms summon you . . . For a time—yes. But altogether, not for anything . . ."

Vasilissa laughed. Let it be thus. They would meet one another "on the wing," as free comrades. Not as husband and wife. That would do!

Vladimir agreed. It would be better than ever so . . . But without Vasilissa's clever, curly little head he could not live.

"I have few friends in the world, Vasia . . . Especially now. Again all of them have swum away. Each one thinks only of himself . . . Whereas we, Vasia, are tried friends. Is not that so?"

They talked as though there was none of the old wall. It had been overthrown.

Silent, not stirring, also, was the serpent in Vasilissa's heart. It seemed to Vasilissa that all jealousy had passed away. And suddenly, unexpectedly, how it bit with sharp fang! . . . Vladimir now was at a loose end, and used of himself to talk of Nina. Evidently he often thought of her. So "well-taught" she was, and so easily could she chat in French with a Frenchman, and in German with a German . . . She had been educated in an institute.

"If she is so 'well-taught,' why cannot she

find work ? Or is she too accustomed to living on free rations ? Parasitism is in her very blood . . . That, of course, is suitable enough amongst mistresses . . . ”

Vasilissa knew that she ought not to speak so, but she could not repress herself. The serpent was biting, and she wanted to prick Volodia for this. Let him too smart.

And Volodia frowned. He looked at Vasilissa with reproach.

“ Why say that, Vasia ? It is not right. That is not my ‘ Vasia-Fury ’ speaking . . . It is an alien ‘ Vasilissa Dementievna. ’ ”

Vasilissa felt uncomfortable and ashamed. But she would not give in. More and more she tried to prick Volodia. Until Volodia lost his temper. Until Vasilissa recollected herself.

“ Do not be angry, dear . . . Pardon me, cruel one. For I love you. If I did not love you I should not torment you . . . ”

In stifling kisses, in intoxication of the body, did they seek one another. So as not to think. So as not to suffer. So as to forget, so as to cheat the inevitable truth . . .

Vasilissa took leave of the Partkom. Then she set about the dismantling of the house. To everything now did she see. To boxes, trunks. To wrappings, mats, straw . . . Vasilissa conferred with Maria Semenovna, and took her advice : how to lay this so that it should not get broken or spoilt ; how to ensure that everything should pass intact to the Director’s new dwelling.

“ And why do you try so much at this ? ” the

dissatisfied Maria Semenovna asked "If you have decided to return to your own gubernia, why fuss? Remember my words you once across the threshold, and the sudarushka—hop, skip, and jump!—into your place So it is for her that you're doing your best, and squandering your strength."

"Ah, well! So be it It is not as though a wife were helping him As a wife I should not be here As a wife I should condemn Vladimir for having made himself into a 'bourgeois' But what does the wife need to care now? He to himself, she—to herself Each of us is to go our own way We have been comrades Why should I not help him? I am not doing it for a husband, or because he demands, and expects, and commands that it be done Voluntarily I am doing it As for a comrade, for a friend And I have no grudge against him If he chooses to trail a lot of lumber behind him, and to cram the people's transport with boxes and crockery and trunks with silken coverings, it is his own affair! With such stuff, of course, I would not travel Nor am I going to enter life hand in hand with him again But as for helping him in packing, why should I not help?"

Volodia could not sufficiently express his surprise Whence had she become such a house-keeper? He boasted of it to Ivan Ivanovitch, to the Managers And he asked Vasilissa who, in the new "region" would set the house in order if Vasilissa did not at once come to him there?

"Who? Then what good is Nina Konstantinovna? Or will she decline to dirty her little white hands? The baryshnia—sudarushnia . . . Ah, it was given her always to have things prepared for her, served on salvers . . . At other people's expense, and on other people's fare . . ."

She pricked Vladimir thus, and then felt vexed. Why?

Vladimir looked at Vasilissa, reproached her with his eyes. As though he had been asking: For what reason, Vasia?

"My dear, desired one! I am cruel, cruel. I myself know it. It is all through love! Do not be angry, dear one. Why, I was only joking."

And she hid her face on Vladimir's breast, choked away the tears which welled to her throat. Vasilissa loved Volodia, come what might! She loved, suffered, and—feared to lose. Better not to be alive . . .

"My poor little heart . . . My kind little Vasiuk . . . I know you. Hence I love you. Hence I cannot wrest my heart from you . . . There is no other such Vasia in the world. I shall never have such another as you."

And once more the stifflingly pungent intoxication whirled them about; once more in caresses they sought oblivion of their pain.

"You must leave a little place in your heart for your mutinous 'Anarchist.'"

"You will remember, in your happiness, your 'Vasia-Fury'? . . ."

Strange days. Indeterminate. Stifling. Dim . . .

know how to sit still. She plied and plied her for news. In astonishment she asked why Vasilissa had not grown fat on her husband's substance. How worn she was, now that she had come back. She looked to have grown thinner. Vasilissa was reticent. Vasilissa had thought that when she saw Grusha she would embrace her friend, and weep out to her the tale of her grief. But, now that she saw Grusha, reticence seized upon her. It was not possible to find words. How could one share such distress with someone else?

People in the building heard that Vasilissa had arrived. The older-established tenants rejoiced. The newer ones became filled with curiosity. What was she like? A member of the Domkom¹ frowned—again, if you please, she would poke her nose into the management? The younger folk, friends of Vasilissa's from the juvenile club, were the first to come running into Grusha's room.

As of old, they at once applied themselves to Vasilissa with a complaint—under the "N.E.P.," the juvenile club had been closed. The authorities declared that it could not be redeemed.² The premises, they said, were wanted for something else. Where now, therefore, were the scholars to do their lessons? Their collections had all been removed, their library distributed into other hands, or else sold.

Vasilissa listened. How was this possible? And at once she boiled up—she would not leave the matter where it was. This very day to the

¹House Committee

²That is to say repurchased from the State

Partkom, to the Narobraz,¹ to the Zhilotdiel. The N.E.P. might be the N.E.P., but what the workers themselves had organised with labour, and with such labour, that do not you dare to touch . . .

"I will go and fight . . . I will not let them do this. Do not be uneasy, children ; I will back up your demands. Even if I have to go to Moscow because of them."

The young people, as of old, laughed. They trusted Vasilissa. She would stand up for them. She would go straight away, and "fight" . . . In the building they called her "the Warrior." Hear, hear ! The young people applauded Vasilissa.

After them the older tenants arrived to exchange greetings. They could scarcely say "How do ?" before each of them was hastening to make Vasilissa a participant in cares, in woe. Each had his, or her, own. Vasilissa listened. According to her custom, she investigated. She gave advice. She consoled.

Quite a crowd accumulated in the garret—a fly could not have found room to hover.

"But, comrades," Grusha implored, "you ought to have waited rather than not even give her time for a meal after the journey . . . The poor creature is tired, by heavens ! Think of the nights that she has been travelling . . . Yet here you come plaguing her with every sort of fiddle-faddle of yours."

"No, Grusha ; do not hinder them . . . I

¹Department of Popular Education.

am not at all tired. What was it you were beginning to say to me, Timofei Timofeivitch? Yes, about the 'tithe' that they have imposed upon you . . . How is that? You are not a master, not an exploiter, not a Director"

As she said "Director" she remembered Volodia. She smoothed away the pain, and immersed herself in other people's cares . . . No time for that.

Gradually her old acquaintances dispersed. Vasilissa got herself ready for the Partkom. At once to put matters through. And she forgot her weariness . . .

She buttoned her jacket. She listened to Grusha's news. Such a man had married. Such another one had left the Party . . . Such a woman had been elected to a Soviet. And suddenly the voice of Madame Fedoseiev. Along all the corridor there could be heard:

"Where is she, our treasure? Our precious champion. Our little dove, Vasilissa Dementievna . . ."

And straight upon Vasilissa's neck. She embraced, she beslavered. And she became suffused with bitter tears, and wetted Vasilissa's face all over.

"I have so been looking for you, my own. I have so missed you . . . Only have I the light that is in *you*, Vasilissa Dementievna. I have kept thinking that, once let her, our defender, come, and she will decide the matter right away. He will not dare, the wretch, to insult his lawful wife in her presence . . . He will be ashamed to

cause a scandal all over the building with his slut . . . 'She will pity me for having to get along alone with young children . . . She will bring him to judgment. He will have at least to obey the Party. On you alone, our treasure, rests all my hope.'

Vasilissa was accustomed to divining other people's woe from two words. But here she stood nonplussed : about what was Madame Fedoseiev lamenting ? Against whom was she presenting a complaint ? Vasilissa could see that Madame was quite changed, not to be recognised. She had been a woman young-looking, strong, full-bosomed. And she had become yellow and thin . . . She had aged.

What could her misfortune be ?

Fedoseiev had started a love affair with one Dora, an "unbaptised Jewess." No longer would he have anything to do with his wife. He was degrading her before the whole neighbourhood. He was not ashamed before people. He had abandoned his own children. He was making off with everything for his darling. Here, Sudarushka, take this ! His family might die in a ditch. Only do not drive away me, your pockmarked one . . .

"And what has Dora, the fool, perceived in him ?" Madame hissed. "As though he had been a man really ! . . . As it is, phew ! A dirty-faced snorter . . . Alone, I bore with him for eight years . . . kissed his poxy jowl for the children's sake . . . I thought to myself that, however ugly you be, Vasilievitch, fate has

tied us, and the Church wedded us, and I must put up with you Aye, he used to seem so horrible when he came crawling up to me with his caresses ! But I stood them I never looked at other men I thought to myself I'll repay him with gratitude , and I gave him, the foul snorter, my youth And here you see what has happened Now that my looks are gone, he goes bowling about after a wench He's tied himself up to a Jewess For a scandal to all the neighbourhood "

Madame Fedoseiev wept, flung herself about Vasilissa listened And it was as though a dark wave came rolling to her heart It was as though in Madame Fedoseiev she beheld her own grief She recognised her own wrong A hardness seized her All her briskness departed somewhere Now she had no inclination to go to the Partkom Merely to thrust herself into a pillow —not to see the light

And Madame Fedoseiev still wept She kissed Vasilissa's shoulders She implored Vasilissa to teach her husband "sense," to stand up for the young children To threaten him with the Party court

Comrades escorted Vasilissa home from the Partkom They could not talk enough And Vasilissa was so cheerful Brisk again As soon as she had reached the Partkom she had forgotten

about everything in the world. It was as though she were living for nothing else. It was as though, except for the Party, Vasilissa had no cares. She agitated herself, disputed. Insisted. Enquired, "informed herself." Interesting it was. Full of joy. Her head worked, but her soul, as it were, soared on wings . . .

She ran up to the garret, never noticed the staircase. And only then realised that she was tired.

Whilst Grusha was seeing to supper Vasilissa lay down upon the bed, and so fell asleep. Soundly.

Grusha looked at her friend. To arouse—not to arouse. She pitied her. Vasilissa had worn herself out. Let her sleep her fill.

She undressed Vasilissa like a child, took off her shoes. Covered her with a counterpane. Hung the lamp about with a kerchief. Herself sat down to work—to throw stitches.

Knock—knock !

Whom was the devil bringing now ? Grusha was angry. No rest.

She opened.

In the doorway Fedoseiev—the husband.

"What do you want ?"

"To see Vasilissa Dementievna . . . Is she at home ?"

"Why do all of you keep coming ? Are you crazy ? A person comes off a journey, is dead beat for want of sleep, and folk turn up like starving dogs after a bone. Vasilissa Dementievna is in bed."

Grusha and Fedoseiev exchanged recrimination. Fedoseiev insisted. Grusha would not admit him.

They agreed upon the morrow.

Grusha slammed the door in Fedoseiev's face. The dirty snorter! A legal wife, three children, Dora walking about with a stomach. Fine goings on!

Grusha did not approve of Fedoseiev. She condemned also Dora. Why had she taken up with a married man? Were there so few single ones? Grusha, as regards morals—was strict. And she "looked to" herself as well. Still had she not forgotten her "betrothed."

Vasilissa awoke. Feeling peaceful. Hushed all over. And autumned sunshine was dancing through the window, and gilding the sewing-machine. Grusha was heating an iron on the stove before "fashioning" a gown.

"For whom is that gown?"

"For a lady of the Ispolkom.¹ For her name-day."

"Then still they celebrate name-days?"

"I should just think so! You should see them—better even than under the old gentry. A whole tableful of snacks alone. Wine. Vodka..."

Grusha's flat-iron hissed. There was no time

¹ Executive Committee

for more talk. Vasilissa snuggled down into the well-known bed. A hard bed. Narrow. She had slept in it with Volodia. How had they found room? Now, even when widened, it was cramped, and the one person disturbed the other.

That was then, and this was now.

Gradually a sense of depression stole to Vasilissa's heart, and broke her rest. Yet at heart she still continued calm. Reconciled. As though after a storm in a garden.

Surely there would be an end to worries?

Grusha remembered the agreement with Fedoseiev. She reported it to Vasilissa.

"Well, let him come in." Yet she felt an unwillingness to have anything to do with the Fedoseievs. It, somehow, offended her: why was it that the Fedoseievs, those mischief-makers, had the same trouble as had occurred in her own case?

She asked about Dora: what she was like.

"You don't remember her?" Grusha returned in surprise. "Dark, good-looking. Danced with a tambourine at the Komsomol festival."

Then Vasilissa did remember Dora. She praised her. The girl had worked on the Kultkommissia,¹ amongst the leather hands. Clever, no matter that she was young. Sang well. To think of Fedoseiev trailing about with her!

Grusha did not agree with Vasilissa. She condemned Dora. It was necessary to observe the law. If the Communists should give countenance

¹ Higher Education Commission.

to such behaviour of husbands, all husbands of wives with young children would set up wenches for themselves. It was said that already a case against Dora was being got up in the Party.

"A case is being got up? Then to a certainty it is Madame Fedoseiev who has built it up. A horrid woman she is." Vasilissa defended Dora "There is no law to compel a man to live with an unloved wife . . . Would you by force have him embrace Madame Fedoseiev? And what if the wife has grown cold? Or if the wife is a bad woman, an intriguer?"

Vasilissa grew excited. She felt rent with anger against Madame. But why? She herself did not know. She disputed about the Fedoseievs, but all the while was thinking of Vladimir. She stood up for Dora, but all the while was seeing a white lace parasol and Nina's red lips . . .

Grusha was surprised that Vasilissa should take the Fedoseievs under her protection.

"They might be blood relations of yours! You yourself cried out upon them to me. As to how many unpleasantnesses you had had because of them. It is your own affair, but I should advise you not to get mixed up in that trouble. Let dogs fight their own . . . Let them settle their own business . . ."

But Vasilissa proved stubborn. If a case should be got up against Dora, Vasilissa would defend her. Pray, did the legal wife, Fedoseiev's, think that, as such, she had all the rights on her side? No. She was mistaken. Other rights too existed. Rights not registered with human laws.

Rights prompted by the heart: And no human being could cut across those rights, or held authority over them. Come what might, the heart demanded its own.

Grusha squinted along the Ispolkom lady's dress, and then glanced at Vasilissa. Attentively. As though she were reading her friend's soul.

Vasilissa frowned. What was Grusha staring for? Was she, Vasilissa, not correct? Were there any laws over the heart?

"As though one could say! The heart is the most important thing of all. What is a human being without one? Just now, when I was looking at you, I could see: that clearly your own heart has become sore . . . There is a great sense of wrong in you, Vasilissa. Wherefore you stand up for Fedoseiev. It is of your husband, I dare swear, that you are thinking; you are wanting to whitewash him to yourself . . . Just that."

Vasilissa said nothing; she lowered her head.

Grusha asked no further questions. She took the dress off the ironing board, shook it out, cleared it of threads. It was ready.

"Have you finished?" Vasilissa enquired whilst herself thinking of something else.

It was ready.

"Then, Grusha, I will go to the Partkom. Do you keep Fedoseiev here."

"Very well."

There ensued for Vasilissa a strenuous time. She was to prepare to depart to the Caucasus. She conferred with Stepan Alexeivitch, studied her instructions, spent evenings at sessions of responsible workers. Thus the hours flew by. Vasilissa had no time to meditate. She had no time to listen to her heart.

And now another care had materialised. The Fedoseiev couple and Dora, as an addition. They had presented themselves with their trouble, and would not let Vasilissa pass.

Fedoseiev came to see Vasilissa, and made full confession to Vasilissa as "upon his soul."

He had become acquainted with Dora Abramovna through the Kultkommissia. He had sung in a choir. His bass had much pleased Dora Abramovna. She had directed him to teachers of singing. She herself was a "musician." She had introduced him to the Kultkommissia. From that the rest had followed. And his spouse had sniffed it out. So trouble had occurred.

Fedoseiev was offended with his wife. She was making mischief—inclining the comrades against Dora Abramovna. She was spreading abroad complaints that Dora Abramovna was "draining" her, Madame Fedoseiev's, family, and living on Fedoseiev's means. But in reality it was the other way about. Not only was Dora not taking so much as a split pea from him, Fedoseiev, but she was caring for his family, sharing things with the

last of them. She was not forgetting the children. The two younger ones she had had taken into a crèche ; and to the eldest one, a scholar, she gave copybooks, school books. Of course, in such a way that Madame should not know of it. Him, Fedoseiev, himself she had fitted out with a collar and shirt for concerts . . . Yet people, out of malice, chattered what was detestable . . .

Fedoseiev ached in soul for Dora. What mattered such things to him ? His care was for her. How if something unpleasant for her were to occur in the Party, because of him ? But his wife was responsible throughout. She was standing in the way.

Vasilissa listened to Fedoseiev, but thought, rather, of Vladimir and Nina. Thus too were they being tormented. They were seeking a way of escape. They were offended with Vasilissa. Why was she standing in the way of their happiness ? . . . Vasilissa advised Madame Fedoseiev voluntarily to get out of the way. It was no good trying to retain an estranged happiness. However much one sought it, it eluded one, flew over one's head. But what of herself ? Was not she herself standing in the way ? Was not she herself still trying to retain an estranged, departed happiness ? . . .

Fedoseiev loved Dora. As he spoke of her he seemed to become gentler from the very doing so. Thus had it been with Vladimir whenever he had recalled Nina . . .

"Dora Abramovna has a heart of gold . . . And in the Union all respect her. The non-Party

people do not believe that there is any desire in the Party to raise a case against her. And many are saying 'Let her come over to us, the non Party people. *We* will always stand up for Dora Abramovna'."

Fedoseiev had scarcely departed when Madame, his spouse, waylaid Vasilissa. She kissed her shoulders, begged her to "champion" her.

Vasilissa did not like her. She repulsed her irritably. And then the woman inveighed against the whole building, Dora, her husband, Vasilissa—subjected them, one and all, to a curse.

Vasilissa met Dora at the Partkom. They found a retired corner in a room where typists were actively typing out documents on type writers. They could talk conveniently under cover of the machines' tapping. It would not be audible to others.

Dora was good looking. Her eyes were intelligent. She pleased Vasilissa.

She was wrapped in a shawl. She was concealing pregnancy.

Dora spoke of her own accord. But not of herself, of Fedoseiev. Her care was for him, Dora appreciated him, valued his talent, thought he had a remarkable voice. Not inferior to Chaliapin's. He only needed to be taught. That was why Dora kept agitating for a marriage with him, so as to wrest him from his family, to force him to give up his cobbler's trade, and occupy himself properly with singing.

Dora extolled Fedoseiev, but complained of his lack of firmness. So long as he was with

Dora he was ready for anything. It had been decided and subscribed : that he would leave his wife, petition for a divorce. But as soon as he had returned home—that had been at an end. He had cried off. And it would all have to be begun again from the beginning.—Despite the months that Dora had agitated, he had not stirred a step.

Vasilissa listened to Dora, but in her heart she felt awkward, uneasy, oppressed. Was not that how Nina spoke of Vladimir ?

To Dora all the formalities of divorce and marriage were superfluous ; for her they were “rubbish” ; she herself was for “free wedlock,” but, until it should be registered at the Commissariat, for Fedoseiev not leaving his spouse for good. In this connection Dora had brought her “interesting condition” into play, so as to “compunctionate” Fedoseiev, and compel him to a divorce. To her the function of maternity was nothing dreadful : she could fend for herself even without a husband.

To “compunctionate” him ? To “compel” him to a divorce ? And Nina, then, had done the same thing ?

Dora praised Fedoseiev, and demanded of Vasilissa sympathy.

But Vasilissa was thinking her own thoughts. Dora saw only the good in Fedoseiev. Did not Nina, probably, love Vladimir in the same way ? . . Vasilissa could not do this. Vasilissa knew also the bad in Vladimir. She loved him, but suffered, ached of heart, longed to correct . . . Perhaps, through this she had offended Volodia ?

"Why does his wife cling to him?" Dora asked vexedly "Did the one *ever* care for the other? Well, it may have been so once, but now they have nothing at all in common Does she really know him? Value him? Does she really understand what he wants?"

"Yes, yes," Vasilissa reflected "Between you and Vladimir too it used to be thus He did not know what I wanted I did not know what he was thinking The paths of our life diverged, went different ways!"

"To Madame Fedoseiev he is alien, in everything the two are different. Their tastes are different, their aspirations are different As a husband, she holds on to him, as a man, he is unnecessary to her For life he is unnecessary to her"

And for her, Vasilissa, was Vladimir necessary as a man? For life?

She put to herself the question, and her heart replied distinctly No, he, as he is become, is not necessary

"What sort of an affection is it," Dora persisted, 'when in nothing is there compatibility? Quarrels and quarrels Each for self alone Neither friendship nor trustfulness"

"Yes, yes!" thought Vasilissa "Neither friendship nor trustfulness"

'Yet I and my comrade Fedoseiev understand one another without a word, as though we were one heart, one soul"

"That must be how Nina and Vladimir love one another!"

It was as though Vasilissa had only just realised this. Realised it, undergone a revulsion of thought.

Vasilissa had many affairs in hand. Party affairs. Pressing affairs. She had to get ready for her departure. But she did not forget about the Fedoseievs. She busied herself. She tried to hurry on a divorce. She strove to make peace between the comrades and Fedoseiev, and to have Dora exonerated.

This last seemed important in Vasilissa's eyes. Very much so. And why? She could not express it in words.

Vasilissa went to the Partkom. And then she hurried homeward. To-morrow she would be en route for the Caucasus. Her head was full of thoughts : as to how to organise the work anew. So that it should issue according to the Party's instructions, and reach the non-Party masses. The non-Party people now were what the Communists were. Only, they still probed more into everything, examined things for themselves. They took nothing on hearsay, on trust. Give them facts ; but, without a fact, you need not trouble yourself.

Vasilissa's head worked. She seemed to have forgotten her womanly grief. Her heart seemed not to be missing her husband-friend. She seemed

not to have lived through a whole summer as a "Director's lady"

Vasilissa hurried along. She had eaten nothing since morning. But whenever she thought of food a nausea came upon her heart, and muddled, and whirled in circles in, her head.

What day was it? Was this some illness or .? A conjecture stirred within her. The third month running, and no monthly issue. She had better see the woman doctor, Maria Andreievna. She lived in a side street close by. They had worked together—organised creches in house-communes. Let her have a look at her. She would say. Whether or not she was too unwell to go to work.

Vasilissa turned into the side street. She approached a white house. She rang the bell.

Maria Andreievna, the woman doctor, responded in person. She was delighted to see Vasilissa.

"Why have you come to visit me? On business of some sort, or just for a call?"

Vasilissa hesitated, felt awkward somehow, and even grew red of cheek. Maria Andreievna looked at her for a moment. Attentively. Then took her by the shoulders.

"Let us go into my cabinet. Let me put you through an examination."

Maria Andreievna questioned Vasilissa about her appetite, about her periods, about her dizzinesses of head. As though she knew every thing in advance. She explored Vasilissa.

This last operation Vasilissa found awkward,

disagreeable. She had never before been to a woman doctor. Indeed, it was actual pain to her when she had to lie down upon a couch for the exploration.

Then Vasilissa rearranged her clothes ; her hands were trembling ; the hooks she simply could not fasten.

By that time Maria Andreievna, in a white overall, was standing by a sink, and carefully washing her hands with soap and a nail brush.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

" Well, Comrade Vasilissa, my love, I do not know whether I shall gladden you or grieve you, but only that there is no doubt in the case. You are in ' the condition. ' There is pregnancy. "

" Pregnancy ? "

Vasilissa was surprised. And the next moment a smile seemed to pass over her soul : A child ? That was splendid.

" Well, shall you go back to your husband now ? " the doctor, in her white overall, asked as she wiped her hands upon a bordered towel.

" To my husband ? No. " And Vasilissa resolutely shook her head. " Never again shall I go back to him. He and I are separate now . . . Each on our own road. "

" You have parted, you say ? At what a bad moment ! How shall you get along now, my dear ? Perhaps the matter could be put right even yet, eh ? To think of you alone with the child . . . You are delicate. "

" I shall not be alone. To-morrow I am to go to the Caucasus. There there is an excellent

'cell' And the women, the Caucasians, are still more so. Together we are going to arrange crèches. A propos, I should like to ask you how you have transferred your crèche here to redemption? Explain, advise."

They talked of crèches, of subsidies, of contributions, of payment of professionals. Vasilissa forgot all about her "tidings. Until, just as she was taking her leave, Maria Andrejevna reminded her with

'You ought not to apply yourself overmuch to work. Remember that your health is not strong. I am afraid for you, my dear.'

She added advice—that this thing "must not be done," and that that thing "would be beneficial." Vasilissa listened, laid to heart. For the sake of the child. Let the child be healthy. Such a little creature—helpless.

Vasilissa went out into the street. As she walked along she smiled.

A child! That was well. She would show other 'women' an example of how to rear an infant 'in Communist fashion.' Absolutely no time had they, as yet, for a family—what with cooking, what with having to manage every sort of fiddle faddle. Crèches shall be organised.

Common life "on redemption terms." As an example on the most conspicuous lines possible.

Vasilissa thought "of redemption," and forgot about the child. Nor did she remember Vladimir. As though he had not been the father.

Vasilissa was packing. A casket turned up. In it Volodia's letters. A portrait of him. And, on the top, an oblong, coloured envelope. Nina Konstantinovna's letter.

Vasilissa looked at it. Turned it over in her hands. Knew it by heart, but wanted to read it once more. It would irritate the sore, but refrain she could not. She would begin to read the letter, and sorrow would arrive, and, gnawing with snakelike fang, riot over her heart. And, after it, chilliness would ensue. Chilliness—wrath against Vladimir. Why had he lied? Why had he deceived?

Vasilissa took the letter. She seated herself nearer the window. Evening was falling. She unfolded the familiar sheet.

She read it attentively. Word by word.

But gnawing sorrow did not materialise. And the serpent, the venomous torturer, seemed to have weakened of fang. Vasilissa's heart rested in peace.

Instead of the accustomed serpent there unexpectedly sprang to birth in Vasilissa's heart—compassion. Compassion for the tears of Nina Konstantinovna. Compassion for the grief, for the pain—for the wrongs, of the other woman's heart. She remembered Nina, how, as she had moved away from the music, she had wiped away tears with finger tips . . . Why had she suffered? Why had she taken upon herself

such anguish ? She had expected a child .
She had put aside the child Why ?

Vasilissa approached the table She swept together Grusha's snippings, and set out the inkstand And so to a letter

"Nina Konstantinovna, I do not know you, what you are like I have seen you only once On that occasion, I tell you frankly, you did not please me But when you wept as you began to walk away from the music I understood your grief with my heart, and pitied you I have just been reading once more your letter to Vladimir Ivanovitch This letter of yours I now restore to you , I took it irregularly, unbeknown to Vladimir But it has served thoroughly its service So that because of it you have no need to be angry with me I have thought much over your letter I have this moment read it again, and now see that I have in me no enmity against you, no sense of wrong I see that you yourself have incurred great anguish because of me As I have said to Vladimir, so I say to you, that there has been enough playing at concealment You ought to make yourself the wife, the lawful wife, of Vladimir Ivanovitch You two are more suited to one another I am not a wife to him, for our tastes are different, and we have walked, in life, along different roads What his thoughts are I do not know , and he, on his side, does not understand me Except for trouble, our life gives us nothing And even without you the same would be the case I have parted from Vladimir, not because you have taken him from

me, but because you have been able to capture a heart which has in it no love for myself. As once I lived without Vladimir, so now I will live again. Whereas for you, in point of fact, life is not life without him. It is always so when one person loves another. I and Vladimir Ivanovitch have lived in free wedlock, and therefore a divorce is not required. I have no reproaches for you. If I had known earlier how you loved one another I should have taken this step long ago. Tell Vladimir Ivanovitch that against him too I have no grudge ; that, as I have been his friend, so his friend I will remain. And to yourself, in case of need, I shall always be ready to render any help or service. Formerly I bore you ill-will in my heart. But, now that I have realised all, I have a great pity for you, for your tears, for your womanly sufferings and pangs. As a sister I wish you to be happy. Salute Vladimir, and tell him, from me, to guard with his heart his young wife. Against eventualities, I am writing down for you my new address. If, or when, you should write I will answer you. You and I, Nina Konstantinovna, are not enemies, even though, against our wills, we have caused one another much sorrow. Neither of us have done so of malice. Goodbye. With wishes for your complete happiness. Vasilissa Malygina."

At foot Vasilissa neatly inscribed her address.

She placed the two letters in an envelope. She licked the envelope with her tongue. She closed it down.

And suddenly, not with her mind, but with her
soul, she understood herewith the end

The end ?

Then where the pain ?

No pain

And where the serpent torturer ?

No serpent

Where the longing—heady, sucking ?

No longing, either

Volodia was the American—not Volodia He
had become “ Vladimir Ivanovitch ” She thought
of Vladimir—she saw Nina She thought of
Nina—Vladimir stood outlined beside the latter

They had become, as it were, one for Vasilissa
Inseparable, indivisible One, and not painfully
Let them be one !

The little flame of love passion had burnt itself
out. It had become ash strewn

Quietness in the heart Restfulness As in a
garden after a storm.

Vasilissa was standing by the window She
was admiring the sunset A sunset stormy,
amongst purple clouds edged with gold Rooks
were circling, cawing, seeking roost

The air was redolent of dry leaves, mushrooms,
autumnal soil Scented, bracing, familiar Not
stalely enervating, as at Vladimir's place

Vasilissa inhaled, greedily imbibed, the air

It was good to be alive !

She leant out of the window. In the little fore-court Grusha was taking down washed linen from a line for the night.

"Grusha ! Grusha ! Come up here quickly. I have news. Good news . . ."

"I am coming."

She came, threw the linen on the bed.

"What is the news ? Have you received a letter of some sort ?"

"A letter is a letter, but I have not received one—I have written one instead. Guess to whom ?"

"To Vladimir Ivanovitch, of course."

"Then you are wrong ! Not to him. But to the sudarushka, his wife, Nina Konstantinovna."

"What has caused that ?" Grusha asked in astonishment.

"You see, Grusha, I read Nina's letter once more, and a great pity for her sprang to birth in my heart . . . She too had, because of me, incurred pain. She had deprived herself of a child for my sake . . . She had endured, sorrowed, suffered . . . And why ? She and I were not rivals, not enemies . . . Had there not been love, had she of calculation taken Vladimir from me, I should never have pardoned her, I should have cherished anger against her. But now that I have realised all about her, why should I ? . She loves Vladimir. She loves him strongly . . . Loves him more than I do . . . Hers is the right . . . For her, without Vladimir, life is not. She writes so : without you I shall perish. But is Vladimir necessary to myself ? I have thought, Grusha—I have thought,

and it has become clear to me that my sorrow is not about him at all. If only Volodika the American could have returned to me. The matter then would have been different. About him, Grusha, my sorrow is—about the former Volodia. But that one, the American, exists no longer! And could not exist. So why should I distress Nina? Why should I stand in the way of their happiness. Retain a Director? Is a 'Director' necessary to me?"

"Yes, why should you need a Director?" Grusha agreed. "Things are bad already, many of our folk here left us, and made themselves Directors. But do not you worry, Vasilissa. Mind, not a few of our 'children' still are left to us. You need only look at the non-Party people! That is where you will find the most Communists—real, proletarian ones."

"And that is true. Our people are being added to daily. But those others? Long ago they bartered their proletarianism for lamps, for quilted overcoats. We do not understand one another."

So I consider, Grusha. Why should I harass Nina? Why should I hold Vladimir so that he be neither married nor free. What good can that do me? It is necessary to make an end. Without anger, let it be. We have suffered enough. When I left Vladimir I did not grasp this. Still I was waiting for something. I was hoping for something. I thought to myself: if Vladimir should depart from me to another woman—I shall die of regret. So I came hither in an intoxication of woe. I had not perceived my

road . . . But when I went to the Partkom, betook myself to business, other cares and anxiety beset me, and the woe ceased, as it were, to be . . . Whether or not you believe me, I tell you honestly that in my heart there is neither pain nor jealousy . . . There is calm in my heart. Restfulness."

"Praise be to the Queen of Heaven!" Grusha hastily crossed herself, glanced at the ikon in the corner. "Not for nothing, Vasilissa, have I prayed to the Most Holy One on my knees by night . . . Help a woman's heart! . . . Heal Vasilissa."

Vasilissa smiled.

"Now, Grusha! You are incorrigible. Still you keep believing in ikons? Yet what you said, believing it, has come true: I have been healed! Veritably so. For ever so many months I walked as though in a delirium. I was not conscious of myself, I would not behold life. I had forgotten the Party . . . And now I am whole. Everything rejoices me, everything seems to me new. There has been—yesterday; it follows that there will be to-morrow as well! . . . Vladimir is not; the Party is . . . It was just the same with me after the typhus, when I began to grow convalescent."

"Only, mustn't you take care that your illness doesn't seize you again? . . . When a previous man begins writing letters of repentance . . ."

"No, Grusha; that cannot happen." Vasilissa nodded her head thoughtfully. "It is as though something has undergone a revolution in my heart . . . 'I have no bitterness against you,

no reproaches for you And of you, of Nina, all jealousy is gone But pity is left' All three of us have been struggling in a charmed circle, seeking escape We cherished enmity against one another We could not find the exit So long as the enmity did not pass But when I admitted Nina into my heart I issued from the circle of sufferings It is not that I pardoned her, what had I to pardon? But I pitied her as a sister, for our womanly pangs, for the fact that she had endured anguish no less than my own Not through any fault of hers, but because life had become for us so trackless I pitied her, Grusha, and things became easier for me There is no more pain No longing No suffering

Well, well! It was bound to be so It means that you have fallen out of love with him Love always is plaited up with pain Let love give one the least bit of joy, and, when one looks for the joy, sorrow knits into it its shadow But when there is no suffering, of course there is an end of love

That is not true, Grusha You should not talk thus And Vasilissa wagged her head

I have not fallen out of love with Vladimir He is here in my heart Only, the love has become different There is no offendedness in it the anger against him is gone It is thanks to him for the past love, for our former happiness Why should I conceive wrath against Vladimir? So long as he loved my happiness was ours When he ceased to love me, whose the

fault? And for the past—thanks again . . . Vladimir has become, as it were, a brother, and Nina—a sister. I think of them, and there is neither anger nor jealousy, but things grow, with me, warmer at heart . . . Do not you believe me, Grusha? What I say is true! . . . Our happiness *has* been; now their turn has arrived . . . To each their right. So long only as there be not, also, enmity and deceit.”

“What you say about deceit is true; but why you should account Nina a sister remains to me a mystery . . . You have got something clever in your mind, Vasilissa! Take care not to be too clever, to be too much the Communist. That you have forgiven Vladimir and Nina—that, of course, is better. When one has forgiven—one has forgotten. Out of heart, out of remembrance . . . But there is no need to love those two! You had better keep your love, your heart, for working-folk. They are coming to be badly off now; they have lost faith in themselves . . . They don’t need Party skill now; give them spirituality, warm them, restore their hope . . . I myself am non-Party, but I see it all. If you, Vasilissa, should ask it of me, I will always tell you the truth. I understand that Communism of yours no less than you.”

“You, Grusha, are one of us. All know that. Only, why do you believe in ikons? . . . Now, now. Do not be angry! Do not frown. I won’t do it any more. I won’t vex you, or dispute. To-day, Grusha, I have something like a festival in my heart. Bright, light, free . . .

And do you not know who has healed me?
Well? Guess!"

"I cannot imagine"

"The Fedoseievs"

"You don't say so! Now, good luck to them for that! For such a work may Madame Fedoseiev be forgiven all her sins and wickednesses"

They laughed

"But I have not told you my chief news, Grusha. I have been to the woman doctor. I am in 'the condition'. I am expecting a child."

"In 'the condition'?" Grusha clapped her hands. "But how can that be so? And how have you come to give your husband his freedom? How could you leave the child without a father? Or, according to the fashion, have you—arranged to cause an abortion?"

"Why an abortion? Let the child grow up. And why a husband? Merely a tradition, that, about 'fathers'. Madame Fedoseiev has three children, but Fedoseiev has gone to Dora."

"And how will you rear it alone?"

"Why alone? The Organisation will rear it. We shall establish crèches. I have been thinking of appointing you to be a colleague with the crèches. You love children. So it will be your and my child, common to us both."

"In the Communist way?"

"Exactly!"

This amused both

"And now, Grusha let us hurry with the packing. The train leaves early to-morrow. To-morrow I go to work. I am to establish on my own lines. Alexeivitch has given me his blessing. . . . Again to work . . . You can understand what joy, Grusha?"

She caught hold of Grusha's hands. They circled about the room like youngsters. They almost upset the lay figure.

They laughed. In the forecourt could the laughter be heard.

"One needs to live, Grusha ! To live !"

To live and work.

To live and strive.

To live, and love life.

Like bees in lilac !

Like birds in the depths of a garden !

Like grasshoppers in turf ! . . .

THE END